

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



Edited By

**Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh**



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

# **The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017**



**Al-Zaytouna Centre  
For Studies & Consultations  
Beirut - Lebanon**

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Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

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## This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

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# Chapter One

## *The Internal Palestinian Scene*



# The Internal Palestinian Scene

## *Introduction*

The years 2016 and 2017 carried over the internal Palestinian crises into 2018 without significant progress, save for the arrangements for handing over the administration of the Gaza Strip (GS) to the government in Ramallah in late 2017, amid receding hopes in a major breakthrough in the Palestinian reconciliation dossier.

The Palestinian representative institutions continued to be in crisis when it came to their ability to represent the people and their aspirations, and they continued to lack effective leadership and executive frameworks, suffering from policy and priority confusion. The current Palestinian leadership bore a major responsibility for obstructing the work of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), failing to actualize the Unified Leadership Framework and preventing the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from convening.

At the same time, the Palestinian national project suffered from crises linked to the contradictory paths of the peace process and resistance, the identification of the priorities of the Palestinian national project, and the management of the conflict with Israel. The Palestinian national project has also been affected by the failure to draft a unified political program compatible with the current stage, and by its inability to assimilate and operationalize the capacities and capabilities of the Palestinian people at home as well as in the Diaspora.

## *First: Palestinian Representative Institutions*

The problems found in Palestinian representative institutions is one of the chronic problems of the modern Palestinian experience. It reflects the general weakness of democratic and consultative culture in the contemporary Arab landscape. The key problem is the “encroachment” of the executive leadership frameworks on the jurisdictions of the legislative frameworks, and the dominance of one Palestinian faction on political life throughout the past five decades. Although the Palestinians bear the main responsibility for these problems, the Arab and international landscape, and the circumstances of the occupation and the

dispossession of the Palestinian people, have all exacerbated internal Palestinian problems, and have weakened the Palestinians' ability to address the flaws in the structure of Palestinian institutions.

Thus, 2016–2017 passed with the Palestinian National Council (PNC) still in paralysis. Additionally, the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) did not convene in this period, and the PLC continued to be obstructed. The PLO leadership, which is also the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Fatah movement, continued to dominate all real power without the legislative branch being able to hold it accountable and monitor its work, and impose the popular will on its agenda. For this, not only have the Palestinian people and their national project pay the price, but Fatah itself, as it has become burdened by challenges and problems.

The PLO Executive Committee continued to hold meetings in 2016 and 2017, and its decisions did not deviate from previous routine ones pursuant to its adherence to the peace process, the two-state solution, and “international legitimacy.” The committee’s general policy concerning the work of the PA and the relationship with Hamas is very similar to that of Fatah. There’s no mention of the need to activate the PLC, nor any criticism of the sanctions imposed by PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas on the GS. Although the committee acknowledged the weakness of the PLO’s institutions, it warned against convening the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad in Istanbul, away from PLO oversight, despite the fact that the PLO had failed to undertake the bare minimum of its responsibilities and had for a long time turned its back on Palestinians in the Diaspora. Interestingly, on 4/5/2016 the Executive Committee decided to “immediately begin” the implementation of PCC decisions, especially in relation to defining political, economic, and security ties with Israel,<sup>1</sup> more than a year after it had convened on 4–5/3/2015 and decided to “end” security coordination with Israel. The PA only partially implemented the decision in the summer of 2017, but even then, it eventually backed down, reflecting the weak influence and inefficacy of the Executive Committee, PCC, and the PNC.

In 2016 and 2017, the PNC did not convene at all. However, the preparatory committee held a meeting in the Palestinian embassy in Beirut on 10–11/1/2017, headed by the president of the PNC Salim al-Za‘noun and attended by members of the Executive Committee and the general secretaries of Palestinian factions, as well as members of the PNC in Lebanon, and the Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon

Ashraf Dabbour. The preparatory committee agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions and decided to convene again in February 2017 with the participation of “all Palestinian factions until the council convenes again.” It stressed the need to embody national unity within the PLO framework, and to make this happen, the conferees agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions pursuant to the Cairo Agreement of 2005 and the Reconciliation Agreement signed on 4/5/2011, through elections where possible and consensus when elections were difficult to hold.<sup>2</sup> However, at the time of writing (January 2018), the preparatory committee had not convened. The Fatah movement Central Committee, which met under the leadership of Mahmud ‘Abbas on 9/8/2017, recommended holding a session of the PNC to elect a new Executive Committee and PCC, and to approve a political program for the coming phase.<sup>3</sup> Fatah leadership sources also spoke of the possibility of the PNC convening in Ramallah in September 2017 or before the end of that year. This raised concerns and drew objections from Palestinian factions such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who said they were against convening the council in the old form, and under occupation in Ramallah, away from national consensus.<sup>4</sup> However, the year 2017 ended without the council convening.

In 2016–2017, the PCC did not convene, however, it convened its 28th session on 14–15/1/2018, to deal with the fallout from the United States of America (US) President Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, as well as to discuss the future of the peace process. The council convened with the attendance of the PLO factions, but Hamas and PIJ both declined to participate, being outside the official membership of the council. The two factions objected to convening the council under occupation in Ramallah. They also said they did not sense any serious change in the conduct of the PLO and PA leadership, which avoided convening the Provisional Leadership Framework, which enjoys a broader national representation and has a greater ability to execute policies on the ground. In its statement declining participation, PIJ asked the leadership “How do you besiege and starve me in Gaza, prosecute and arrest me in the West Bank, and want me to be a false witness in the name of national interest, in Ramallah?”<sup>5</sup>

In its final statement of the 28th session, the PCC resolved that the transitional period stipulated in the agreements signed in Oslo, Cairo, and Washington and the commitments it covered were no longer valid. The council decided to task the

PLO Executive Committee with suspending its recognition of Israel until Israel recognized the state of Palestine along the borders of 1967, repealed the decision to annex East Jerusalem, and end settlement activities. The PCC reiterated its decision to suspend all forms of security coordination with Israel and disengage from the relationship of economic dependence established by the Paris Protocol, to achieve independence for the national economy and asked the PLO Executive Committee and the institutions of the State of Palestine to implement these motions. The Council condemned Trump's decision and sought to thwart it, saying the US administration's eligibility as a mediator had ended and it could therefore no longer be a partner in the peace process except if the decision is repealed.<sup>6</sup> The PCC decisions were met with widespread Palestinian criticism, especially from Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP, who considered them below expectations and incommensurate with the level of the challenges.<sup>7</sup>

President 'Abbas continued to obstruct the work of the Hamas-dominated PLC in the two years studied by this report, refusing to allow the PLC to convene. Meanwhile, the PA presidency continued to exercise its full powers, supplanting the PLC's role in passing decrees and legislations. The "National Consensus" Government in Ramallah also continued to work without the credibility of a vote of confidence in the PLC, which was unable to hold it accountable or even observe its work. The climate of division cast more shadows on this issue, when the PA government in Ramallah suspended the salaries of 37 members of parliament (MPs) of the Change and Reform bloc (of which Hamas is the dominant party) in West Bank (WB) in June, with the Ministry of Finance refusing to give an explanation. Ahmed Bahr, PLC deputy speaker, said this was "a declaration of war" against his council.<sup>8</sup>

However, Hamas continued to convene the PLC as the holder of the majority of its seats in GS, passing some laws for example on 2/3/2016 when it adopted an administrative dispute resolution bill from the second reading.<sup>9</sup> On 8/3/2017, the PLC passed an amended Judiciary Authority Law, and a law banning encroachment on government land from the first reading.<sup>10</sup>

Other disputes erupted in April 2016, when President 'Abbas ordered the establishment of the first Supreme Constitutional Court, which Hamas saw as a disastrous violation of the constitution itself.<sup>11</sup> On 27/4/2016, the PLC convened a special session to discuss 'Abbas's decision, and the deputies argued the court was

unconstitutional and illegal and had purely political objectives. They also argued that the establishment of the court contravened Article 103 of the Basic Law, adding that Law No. 3 of 2006 regarding the court had been repealed following a decision by the PLC in March 2006.<sup>12</sup> The dispute escalated on 23/3/2017, when the Administrative Court in GS annulled ‘Abbas’s decision to establish the Constitutional Court, with support from the Legal Committee in the PLC.<sup>13</sup>

When the Constitutional Court granted ‘Abbas the power to revoke the immunity of any PLC deputy, Deputy Speaker Ahmed Bahr led the objections, saying the ruling was unlawful and unconstitutional.<sup>14</sup> The constitutional dispute escalated when the PLC rejected ‘Abbas’s decision on 12/12/2016 to lift the immunity of five PLC deputies, Muhammad Dahlan, Najat Abu Baker, Ashraf Jum‘ah, Jamal al-Tirawi, and Shami al-Shami, in preparation for their interrogation. The PLC deemed the move to be an encroachment on its own jurisdictions.<sup>15</sup>

On 21/1/2016 Hamas rejected the Supreme Media Council law enacted by ‘Abbas, saying it reinforced the Palestinian division.<sup>16</sup> In March 2017, Hamas deputies in GS approved amendments to the Administrative Committee law, which empowered it to manage government institutions in GS,<sup>17</sup> causing an immediate backlash from the PA and Fatah leadership.

## ***Second: The National Consensus Government***

The National Consensus Government formed by Rami Hamdallah was ostensibly established to capture the state of inter-Palestinian accord, especially between the two sides of the divide/ unity, Hamas and Fatah. However, this government effectively became the government of the PA president. In 2016 and 2017, it became a crucial part of the president’s toolkit that he used to pressure his supposed partners in the government under cover of “accord.” The government took remarkably harsh measures against GS, issuing sharply worded and bellicose statements and accusations against Hamas. This government seemed “reassured,” while carrying out these policies, because the PA president had obstructed the Hamas-dominated PLC, the only authority able to give confidence to, hold accountable, and vote down the government. In other words, the government operated in a climate in which the Palestinian legislature was paralyzed, despite it being the parallel pillar to the executive branch.

Tension dominated relations between the government and GS run by Hamas, in the period covered by this report until the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in October 2017, in Cairo. The Hamdallah government accused Hamas of obstructing the handover of power and exercise of its duties in GS, claiming that Hamas was still running GS through a de-facto government, at a time when the PA government had spent up to \*\$17 billion on GS, since the schism happened until 2017.<sup>18</sup> The Hamdallah government called on Hamas to hand over all administrative functions and crossings, and allow it to exercise its full duties in GS.

But Hamas contested the figures cited by the government on spending in GS, saying it was a reversal of the facts meant to mislead the public. Hamas said the government's budget received up to \$100 million a month from taxes levied on goods that enter GS, while the value of the taxes imposed by the government on the diesel used in GS's power plant had exceeded double the cost of the fuel.<sup>19</sup>

In conjunction with the sanctions imposed by the PA on GS in mid-2017, the government accused Hamas of changing its sacred, fundamental principles to serve failing agendas.<sup>20</sup> PA Spokesperson Tariq Rishmawi claimed that the PA had spent \$125 million a month in GS, while Hamas and the de-facto administration there imposed illegal taxes on Palestinian citizens, and collected other taxes and all revenues, without transferring them to the treasury, thus stealing the money.<sup>21</sup> Based on these allegations, the government imposed collective punishment on the people of GS, saying its condition for lifting them would be for Hamas to hand over full powers and jurisdictions in GS.

Hamas's Spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, responded by saying that "nothing is stopping Hamdallah from working in Gaza," adding that Hamdallah's remarks about "allowing his government to work in Gaza" were a pretext to cover up his "ugly role against the people of the Strip."<sup>22</sup> After the dissolution of the Administrative Committee in September 2017, Salah al-Bardawil, member of Hamas's politburo, said, "The National Consensus Government has received all its functions in Gaza and is governing the Strip. Talk about a parallel government by Hamas is baseless." He added, "All the issues we had agreed on in the Cairo Agreement, from the government and civil servants to communal reconciliation and others, are being implemented. The factions that took part in the Cairo meetings

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\* US Dollar.

and the Egyptians themselves can bear witness to this.” Al-Bardawil also noted that “the Palestinian reconciliation is stumbling once again because of US, Israeli, and Arab pressures.”<sup>23</sup>

The electricity crisis continued to ravage the GS, with Hamas accusing the government of engineering it and deliberately causing the suffering of GS’s residents and services. In early 2016, the Energy Authority in GS said that the maneuvers by the General Directorate of Petroleum in Ramallah, and its refusal to transfer shipments to operate the main power plant in GS, was the main cause of the crisis, saying it had paid for 900 thousand liters of fuel without receiving any quantity.<sup>24</sup> In early March 2017, signs emerged of a near solution to the electricity crisis, through efforts led by the national and Islamic forces in GS, who presented a formula for a consensual resolution. However, Hamas later said the efforts failed, that the government had obstructed them despite the fact that Rami Hamdallah had agreed to the demands. The government denied the accusations, instead blaming Hamas for the continuation of the crisis.<sup>25</sup> On 28/5/2017, the Energy Authority in GS said it had sent a written reply to the Energy Authority in Ramallah, in which it complied with all conditions set by the government to resolve the electricity crisis, but to no avail.<sup>26</sup>

In June 2017, the Consensus Government launched a series of punitive measures against GS, including suspending Israeli-supplied electricity, by ending the transfer of taxes allocated to cover energy costs to Israel.<sup>27</sup> Despite the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement between Hamas and Fatah in October 2017, the electricity crisis remain unresolved at the end of the year. In early 2018, the PA resumed supplying around 50 megawatts to GS.<sup>28</sup>

### **The GS Administrative Committee and the Government’s Punitive Measures**

The management of the Administrative Committee—formed by Hamas in GS—of government agencies and departments in March 2017, caused a lot of controversy and a war of words between Hamas, and the PA and Fatah and their allies. It is notable that there were no harsh reactions when Hamas had formed an unofficial Administrative Committee headed by Ziad al-Zaza to run government agencies following the Israeli war on GS in the summer of 2014. The work of the previous Consensus Government was obstructed in GS following sharp differences between Fatah and Hamas regarding mechanisms for the implementation of the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo in 2011, and all this had not caused

negative reactions. However, the re-establishment of the committee in late March 2017, headed by ‘Abdul-Salam Siyam, former secretary of the Haniyyah government, was met with a backlash.

Apparently, the previous Administrative Committee headed by al-Zaza was criticized for its performance, after facing challenges beyond its capabilities. It could not find satisfactory solutions to the myriad crises ravaging GS. In the recent case, with the continuation of the blockade and the refusal of the Consensus Government to discharge its duties in GS, amid worsening living and economic conditions that have exacerbated the suffering of Gazans to unprecedented levels, a new Administrative Committee was formed.

Yet many also attributed the move to Hamas’s internal elections. Indeed, these elections produced new leaders, most notably Yahya al-Sinwar, who was elected chief of Hamas in GS. Al-Sinwar has since been keen to end the cycle of recession and paralysis, reduce the effects of the blockade and alleviate the suffering of GS’s residents.

Despite the short period of its work, not lasting more than six months, the Administrative Committee quickly became the dominant news headline on the internal Palestinian scene, particularly concerning relations among Palestinian factions, marked by sharp disputes, wars of words, and loud accusations.

Analysis of the circumstances surrounding the re-instatement of the Administrative Committee headed by Siyam reveals the divergent views and interpretations between the leaders of Hamas in GS and their counterparts abroad. On 15/3/2017, Doha-based Hamas leader Hussam Badran denied, the existence of any committee for administering GS, saying that all talk about it was speculation by the media.<sup>29</sup> However, on 16/3/2017, the PLC in GS, dominated by Hamas’s bloc, passed amendments to the law forming the Administrative Committee that had been approved in the past, settling the debate regarding the matter, and granting the committee the necessary legitimacy to carry out its work despite objections from Fatah and the PA.<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Bahr, deputy speaker, said the Administrative Committee would be temporary, and was designed to provide services to the citizens following the failure of the Hamdallah government to assume its responsibilities. Hamas figure Musa Abu Marzuq said the committee would be dissolved automatically as soon as the government assumed its duties and commitments. The PA responded to the decision on 27/4/2017 with a number of sanctions on GS.<sup>31</sup>

Hamas said the committee was merely a government committee and not an alternative to the National Consensus Government, stressing its formation was the result of a need to plug the vacuum left by the government and its reluctance to provide services to Gazans. On 23/3/2017, the committee officially began its work.<sup>32</sup>

As soon as that committee was announced, Fatah lashed out against Hamas. Fatah Spokesperson Usama al-Qawasmi said it was a move towards the secession of GS from the WB.<sup>33</sup> However, Hamas's Musa Abu Marzuq stressed the Administrative Committee formed by the movement was nothing new, having been established in the wake of Israel's war on GS in 2014, indicating that the Administrative Committee was reinstated because of the Consensus Government's relinquishing of its responsibilities and commitments vis-à-vis GS.<sup>34</sup>

After the announcement, the government took harsh punitive measures, causing destruction to what was left of GS's economy. However, these measures were not necessarily strictly a response to the committee formation. Indeed, a month before the move, Fatah Central Committee member Jibril Rajoub threatened Hamas with "firm decisions to end the hijacking of Gaza."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the sanctions could also be read in the context of Trump's rise to power and increasing hostility to Islamic movements and resistance groups in the region.

On 4/4/2017, the Hamdallah government implemented pay cuts to civil servants in GS. Arif Abu Jarad, head of the union representing PA employees in GS, stated that the PA forced nearly 11 thousand military staff to retire early, describing it as a "crime," and stressing that the government's pretext of financial difficulties was a lie.<sup>36</sup> Palestinian leaders denounced that move, which they deemed to have violated Palestinian values and moral and humane principles.<sup>37</sup> Khalil al-Hayyeh said Hamas did not accept threats, adding that the PA's measures against GS had exacerbated the division.<sup>38</sup>

On 27/4/2017, the PA asked the Israeli side to stop deducing the cost of electric supply to GS from tax transfers. On 6/5/2017, President 'Abbas issued a decree exempting Gazans from paying taxes and fees for government services.<sup>39</sup> The PA suspended medical transfers from GS and stopped issuing passports for Gazans. Hamas subsequently condemned the PA for precipitating an electricity and fuel crisis, and deliberately exacerbating suffering in the enclave, further denouncing the punitive measures taken against GS, saying 'Abbas's actions amount to crimes

against humanity.<sup>40</sup> This was denied by Fatah, which instead blamed Hamas for the difficult conditions in GS.<sup>41</sup> On 4/6/2017, the PA stopped paying the salaries of 277 prisoners freed from Israeli prisons. On 4/7/2017, the PA forced 6,145 civil servants in GS into early retirement,<sup>42</sup> prompting a warning from the Ministry of Health in GS, whose Spokesperson Ashraf al-Qadra said early retirement affected 40% of his ministry's specialized and experienced cadres, which could cause dire effects on health services.<sup>43</sup>

On 9/7/2017, the PA suspended the salaries of 37 Hamas-aligned MPs for the month of June 2017. Ahmed Bahr, PLC deputy speaker, said the move violated the Palestinian Basic Law and obstructed the work of PLC, with a view to monopolize Palestinian decision-making, deeming it a declaration of war on the PLC and its members. On 14/8/2017, 'Abbas decided to resume paying the salaries of freed prisoners but only in the WB. On 26/8/2017, Hamdallah decided to allow health and education workers forced into early retirement in GS to return to their posts, "in order to secure services to the citizens of the Strip."<sup>44</sup> However, Hamas Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum said that the move was not enough and called for the reversal of all early retirement decisions affecting civil servants.<sup>45</sup>

The Health Ministry Spokesperson Ashraf al-Qadra stated, on 10/9/2017, that as a result of the PA's measures, 40% of medicines and medical consumables were depleted in GS's hospitals. 30 patients at least had died as a result of the PA's measures, while three thousand patients needed to travel urgently to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948 or to Egypt for treatment.<sup>46</sup>

In June, Israel began reducing the electricity supply to GS by more than a quarter, after the PA decreased its payments for electricity. Mohammad Shtayyeh, head of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), criticized how Egypt facilitated the supply of diesel to GS based on agreements between Hamas and Egypt on one hand, and Hamas and Muhammad Dahlan on the other.<sup>47</sup>

In an attempt at de-escalation, delegations from Fatah and Hamas met in GS on 18/4/2017 in a consultative meeting that was unpublicized. It was agreed that the government would resume its functions in GS, with the dissolution of the Administrative Committee as soon as the government took its full responsibilities.<sup>48</sup> However, it seems the outcome of that meeting was not sufficient to convince President 'Abbas to go ahead with reconciliation, and tensions again dominated

the relationship between the two movements. Fatah Central Committee member ‘Azzam al-Ahmad threatened to suspend spending in GS and addressed Hamas leaders by saying “Either Hamas dissolves this committee and hands over administration of Gaza Strip to the National Consensus Government, or bear the responsibility and the full expenses of government.”<sup>49</sup>

With the negative repercussions of the punitive measures imposed by the PA against GS to force Hamas to hand it over to the National Consensus Government, Fatah demonstrated a stern attitude vis-à-vis Hamas. ‘Azzam al-Ahmad of Fatah said his movement would not hold any reconciliation meetings with Hamas before the dissolution of the Administrative Committee.<sup>50</sup> On 28/6/2017, President ‘Abbas chaired an emergency meeting of the government, calling on Hamas to dissolve the Administrative Committee and empower the Consensus Government in to alleviate the suffering of the residents of GS.<sup>51</sup>

On 5/7/2017, Isma‘il Haniyyah, the head of Hamas’s politburo, made several conditions for the dissolution of the committee, including: lifting the sanctions on GS; forming a national unity government; holding comprehensive elections; and re-forming the PNC pursuant to the Beirut Accords.<sup>52</sup> After that, a delegation from Hamas and the Administrative Committee headed by Rawhi Mushtaha went to Egypt, in a visit described as successful by Egyptian former assistant foreign minister Hussein Haridi, who said that the two sides discussed securing the Egyptian border with GS and other issues.<sup>53</sup>

A delegation from Hamas in the WB visited President ‘Abbas in August 2017, with Fatah Central Committee member Jamal Muhaisen saying the meeting had focused on the need to dissolve the Administrative Committee in GS, adding that ‘Abbas had told the Hamas delegation he would not reverse his measures against GS until the Consensus Government was empowered there.<sup>54</sup> However, Mahmud al-Zahhar, head of Hamas’s PLC bloc, conditioned the dissolution of the committee on the government’s reversal of the punitive measures against GS.<sup>55</sup> Amid the continuation of the punitive measures imposed by the government, and reports the PA intended to force thousands of civil servants in health and education into early retirement, Administrative Committee Head ‘Abdul-Salam Siyam said Hamas was ready to confront these decisions, which he described as a crime and political corruption.<sup>56</sup>

Things escalated further in mid-August when President ‘Abbas issued threats affirming the escalation of his measures against GS if Hamas insisted on refusing to dissolve the committee.<sup>57</sup> Fatah Spokesperson Usama al-Qawasmi, demanded that Hamas dissolve the Administrative Committee in order to invite it to the PNC meetings, which were due to be held in mid-September 2017.<sup>58</sup>

Following a visit by a Hamas delegation headed by Haniyyah to Cairo, on 12/9/2017, Hamas left the decision regarding the committee with Egypt, in case President ‘Abbas agreed on the reconciliation. However, Majed al-Fityani, secretary of Fatah’s Revolutionary Council, reiterated the condition that Hamas must immediately dissolve the committee and allow the Consensus Government to operate freely in GS.<sup>59</sup> To encourage Egypt’s efforts to achieve reconciliation and end the division, on 17/9/2017 Hamas announced it would dissolve the Administrative Committee, inviting the government to return to GS to carry out its duties immediately and agreed to holding elections.<sup>60</sup>

In response, President ‘Abbas and the Consensus Government welcomed the announcement, expressing relief at the dissolution of the Administrative Committee. PA Spokesperson Yusuf al-Mahmud said that the government was ready to go to GS and assume its full responsibilities there, confirming the fact that the government had a comprehensive plan to exercise its duties and alleviate the suffering of the people of GS.<sup>61</sup> Then the Administrative Committee announced that it was officially ending its operations, stressing it would not be an obstacle to the implementation of the agreements made in Cairo.<sup>62</sup>

According to press sources, the Administrative Committee held a final meeting with ministry officials in GS to hand over its duties, pending the start of the Consensus Government’s duties in accordance with the Cairo agreements.

### **Local Elections**

Local elections in Palestine saw some dramatic developments, from the acceptance of Hamas and other factions to participate in them, to them being obstructed, which prompted Hamas and the factions to withdraw, before they were held exclusively in WB.

On 3/5/2016, the government announced that elections would be held on 8/10/2016, instructing the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) to prepare for them,<sup>63</sup> according to Local Government Minister Hussein al-A‘raj,

who said the elections would be held in accordance to the list system based on proportional representation.<sup>64</sup> On 23/6/2016, the CEC published the timetable of the elections. CEC Head Hanna Nasir said that the government pledged to abide by the results of the GS round.<sup>65</sup> In a step aimed at reassuring Hamas and other Palestinian factions, Nasir met with a Hamas delegation and confirmed he had obtained additional guarantees from all sides to respect the results of the elections.<sup>66</sup> The commission then started accepting candidacies on 16/8/2016.<sup>67</sup>

The decision by Hamas to run in the municipal elections in the WB and GS however caused concerns of the Israeli Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*), which predicted Hamas candidates would capture most council seats in the towns and villages, and pave the way for their domination of the PA. Alex Fishman, writing in Israel's *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, said that the assessment in Israel was that Hamas would win the elections in Hebron and surrounding localities, including those south of Mount Hebron, Jenin, Nablus, and Qalqiliya. Fishman said the “results in Tulkarm remain uncertain, but many other bad surprises are expected.”<sup>68</sup> Similar concerns were expressed by the Fatah movement.

At the end of August 2016, the CEC published the preliminary schedule of lists running in the elections, numbering 787 in WB and 87 in GS, and said would allow all sides to challenge them pursuant to the laws in force.<sup>69</sup> Election preparations continued according to plan, amid official reassurances by ‘Abbas who stressed the need to hold the elections on time and reinforce the political process.<sup>70</sup>

The predictions were that Hamas would win in several major towns and localities, so the PA arrested around 70 Hamas activists, in an attempt to head off any election victory by the movement.<sup>71</sup>

Avi Issacharoff, Palestinian Affairs analyst at Israel's Walla! news website, reported that the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Major General (Maj. Gen.) Yoav Mordechai, had warned the PA leadership that holding elections could prove to be a dangerous bet. *Haaretz*'s military analyst Amos Harel also wrote that Israeli officials warned PA counterparts that they were too optimistic about winning the elections, cautioning that Hamas might take advantage of the elections to increase its influence in the WB and undermine the PA and its aging president.<sup>72</sup>

Hamas-affiliated parties filed several challenges against some candidate lists, including some associated with Fatah. The commission accepted four challenges

in GS, disqualifying four lists in Beit Hanoun, Umm al-Nasr, al-Zahraa, and al-Nusairat, including three Fatah-affiliated lists.<sup>73</sup> The decision by the CEC elicited an immediate objection from Fatah, but the commission said one or more candidates had been disqualified due to not meeting the legal requirements, based on the law governing local council elections (No. 10 of 2005) and its amendments. In response, Fatah-affiliated parties appealed the decisions of the CEC with the Supreme Court of Justice in Ramallah, seeking to reinstate the Fatah lists that had been disqualified, arguing that Gaza's courts lacked the legitimacy to issue decisions.<sup>74</sup> On 8/9/2016, the Supreme Court (in turn accused by some Palestinians of being influenced by Fatah) decided to suspend local elections until the appeal filed by five disqualified lists was considered. The CEC subsequently said it would immediately suspend all its preparations for local elections. On 21/9/2016, the commission said the date of the local elections, set for 8/10/2016, was no longer feasible, after the Supreme Court of Justice complied with the prosecutors from the Palestinian government who requested an adjournment to 3/10/2016 in order to prepare a defense. For its part, Hamas, which had seemed in a strong position, accused the government of obstructing the elections. Fatah and Hamas accused each other of seeking to thwart the elections and exclude rival candidates. Yoni Ben Menachem, an Israeli analyst, said that 'Abbas had come under pressure from Egypt and Jordan to postpone the elections, fearing a Hamas victory.<sup>75</sup>

On 3/10/2016, the Supreme Court of Justice decided to hold local elections in WB but not in GS and said it would set the date within a month.<sup>76</sup> Hamas, PIJ, PFLP and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) rejected the decision. This was while the CEC expressed its respect for the decision, despite saying it would deepen the division, and harm public interest and democracy. The Commission recommended to 'Abbas to postpone the elections for six months, to give more time for internal Palestinian arrangements to be made.<sup>77</sup> But, on 1/11/2016, in a move that appeared to be a prelude to holding the elections, the government of Rami Hamdallah dissolved several municipal councils in WB, and approved the formation of committees that would take over their functions until elections were held.<sup>78</sup> Hamas rejected the new local elections law passed by the PA in early November 2016, calling on it to stop tampering with laws and undermining the democratic process.<sup>79</sup>

On 3/1/2017, the government approved a bill to establish an Electoral Court to consider all appeals, violations, and other legal issues related to local council elections. At the end of January, the government decided to hold elections in all governorates on 13/5/2017.<sup>80</sup> Hamas also rejected this decision, and its Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum explained that “the decision to hold elections on 13 May serves the policy of the Fatah movement, and is tailored to fit its interests at the expense of the interests of the Palestinian people and the unity of its institutions.” Hamas stressed that “the government works for the benefit of Fatah, and does not serve the interests of all Palestinians equally,” adding that “the decision comes on the heels of spoiling the electoral process by Fatah which has backtracked from all that has been agreed upon.”<sup>81</sup> However, in early February 2017, the CEC announced the elections schedule, with the government later deciding to hold them in WB only, claiming it was not possible to hold them in GS after the failure of a meeting between a Hamas delegation and the Commission Chairman Hanna Nasir.<sup>82</sup>

On 13/5/2017, elections were held in WB only, with Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP boycotting the vote that they said entrenched the division and consecrated the political and geographical division between WB and GS. Hanna Nasir announced that the turnout was 53.4% across 145 localities, while 181 local councils were won by default. Independents accounted for 65% of winning candidates, while partisan lists got 35%,<sup>83</sup> reflecting the weak performance of Fatah despite the boycott by its rivals.

On 30/5/2017, the government decided that run-off elections in 66 local councils in WB would be held on 29/7/2017, and to hold the second phase of local council elections in GS due on 14/10/2017.<sup>84</sup> However, Hamas rejected this decision, stressing that no elections could be held in GS while the government continued to tamper with laws and electoral mechanisms.<sup>85</sup> Subsequently, on 11/7/2017 the government decided to postpone elections in GS until suitable conditions were met.<sup>86</sup>

With the signing of the Palestinian Reconciliation Agreement, it seems that the dossier of local elections and elections in general was a function of Palestinian national reconciliation criteria. Indications suggest it is difficult to hold elections in the foreseeable future, due to various political and factional considerations.

### ***Third: Developments Related to Putting the Palestinian Political House in Order and National Reconciliation***

In 2016 and 2017, national reconciliation efforts suffered a major setback, despite the many meetings, efforts, and attempts aimed at healing the divide between the main factions in Palestine.

Reconciliation efforts did not meet any success until late 2017, when Hamas dissolved the Administrative Committee in GS, which was followed by the signing of the Cairo agreement, which practically allowed the government in Ramallah to assume administration of GS. The PA and Fatah continued to obstruct the PLC and took no measures to ensure effective partnership in the government especially in WB. In general, many hurdles and risks were left that will continue to threaten the prospects for reconciliation.

On 3/1/2016, the Islamic and national forces proposed an initiative to reach an agreement regarding the Rafah crossing and its handover to the National Consensus Government, in preparation for its reopening to passengers—the crossing was closed permanently except for intermittent periods. However, the initiative stalled as Hamas raised queries it said were fundamental about it.<sup>87</sup> Although Hamas said it would form a steering committee to follow up the ideas and proposals made, President ‘Abbas accused the movement of ignoring the initiative he had approved. Hamas later met with a committee from the factions to discuss the initiative and welcomed the prospect of the government assuming its responsibilities with the crossing and other matters, stressing it had no objection to a national inter-factional committee overseeing the crossing. However, the inter-factional committee rejected Hamas’s proposal, while the Palestinian government said Hamas’s proposal was an attempt at “stalling and evasion.”<sup>88</sup> Fatah’s Usama al-Qawasmi said Hamas’s proposals on the crossing were meant to invalidate the substance of the Palestinian factions’ initiative.<sup>89</sup>

With the stalling of inter-factional efforts to resolve the Rafah crossing crisis, and the failure to reach a consensual formula acceptable to both Fatah and Hamas—amid reports of a meeting between the two in Doha, Qatar—on 2/2/2016 the PLC launched a national initiative to achieve reconciliation and end the division. It tackled six main issues: PLO; the formation of a government; convening the PLC; elections; social reconciliation; and the Palestinian political program. The

initiative put forward by the deputy speaker, Ahmed Bahr, called for quickly convening the PLO Provisional Leadership Framework, to draft a national strategy to tackle challenges, and called for forming an inclusive national unity government before re-convening the PLC to hold a vote of confidence and monitor its work. In addition, the initiative called for agreeing on a specific date for legislative, presidential, and PNC elections.<sup>90</sup>

In April 2016, Fatah leader in captivity Marwan Barghouti proposed a charter based on political partnership, with the goal of unifying Palestinian ranks and building a strategic relationship with Hamas. Barghouti put forward a ten-point initiative to delineate the strategic relationship with Hamas and end internal division. Barghouti called for “an honest, frank, and straightforward dialogue between the Fatah Central Committee and Hamas’s politburo in their entirety and not between delegates.”<sup>91</sup>

On 21/10/2016 PIJ Secretary-General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, proposed a ten-point initiative to end the crisis of the Palestine issue, including: ‘Abbas declares Palestinian withdrawal from the Oslo Accords; reforming the PLO; withdrawing recognition of Israel; declaring the current stage of the Palestinian people’s life as “national liberation from occupation”; reviving resistance; and pursuing the Jerusalem *Intifadah*. Shallah called for drafting a national program to reinforce the steadfastness of the people on their land, while the program also called for “comprehensive national dialogue” among all the constituencies of the Palestinian people to push for a new track, end the division, restore unity, and develop a new national program.<sup>92</sup>

Shallah indicated that adopting these measures remained primarily the task of President ‘Abbas, calling on him to act to save the people and the cause, before he leaves his post. Fatah however quickly snubbed the initiative, describing it as unrealistic. Hamas, the PFLP, the DFLP, and the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP)—as well as Muhammad Dahlan—welcomed the initiative, stressing the importance of several of its clauses.<sup>93</sup>

In an attempt to de-escalate the internal situation in Palestine, the PNC preparatory committee held meetings at the Palestinian embassy in Beirut on 10–11/1/2017, chaired by PNC Chairman Salim al-Za’noun, with the participation of Executive Committee members and secretary generals of the factions, as well as delegations from Hamas, PIJ, al-Sa’iqah, and the PFLP-General Command (GC).

The committee agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions in accordance with the 2005 Cairo Agreement and the 2011 Reconciliation Agreement, through elections. Should this prove impossible, the members could then be selected through consensus. The conferees agreed on the necessity of forming a national unity government, unifying the institutions, resuming the reconstruction of, and making preparations to hold presidential, PLC, and PNC elections. The committee called on President ‘Abbas to immediately initiate consultations with all political forces to agree on forming a National Unity Government. The conferees agreed on the preparatory committee resuming its work, and holding meetings regularly with the participation of all Palestinian forces until the PNC was convened. The committee asked al-Za‘noun to complete the necessary measures to accomplish an electoral system for the PNC.<sup>94</sup>

However, the dispute over the formation of a new national unity government obstructed holding any new meetings for the preparatory committee. Hamas declared its rejection of holding a PNC session to elect a new Executive Committee and PCC and approve its political program, before renewing the PNC itself. PIJ and PFLP refused convening the council in Ramallah. On 12/8/2017, the PLO Executive Committee decided to continue consultations to convene the PNC as soon as possible. If Hamas and the PIJ were to continue refusing to participate in the council session, a way would be found to convene it without them. By mid-October 2017, no new PNC session was convened, as the factions asked for further consultations and more time to persuade Hamas to participate.<sup>95</sup>

It seemed that a new crisis was about to erupt in the Palestinian landscape when the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad was held on 25–26/2/2017 in Istanbul. Six thousand Palestinian participated, and a final statement urged for “unity on the basis of commitment to the program of resistance and the Palestinian National Charter of 1964, and the Palestinian National Charter of 1968.” Although Munir Shafiq, chairman of the Congress’ secretariat, said the event did not seek to supplant the PLO “but to reform and rebuild it,” the PLO and Fatah boycotted the conference, believing it was “deviating from the unity of Palestinian ranks” and called for preempting anyone “attempting to tamper with the PLO.”<sup>96</sup>

### **Arab, Regional, and International Initiatives**

Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey played key roles in mediating between Fatah and Hamas to achieve national reconciliation. In January 2016, Fatah and Hamas held unofficial meetings in Doha and Ankara, where the two sides drafted an unofficial

document that would act as a “political and resistance program for the coming phase and pave the way for the formation of a national unity government to prepare for general elections.”<sup>97</sup>

These meetings were held with Qatari sponsorship. On 7–8/2/2016, a delegation from Fatah headed by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad met with a delegation from Hamas headed by Musa Abu Marzuq in Doha for two days of talks about mechanisms for implementing reconciliation.<sup>98</sup> The meeting led to—after Hamas agreed to participate in PLO sessions—a specific practical vision and arrangements for the formation of a national unity government that would govern both WB and GS, prepare for legislative and presidential elections, and convene the PNC and prepare for elections at its level. The two sides agreed to implement what was agreed upon in Cairo in 2011 regarding the security forces, and to form a supreme security committee via the League of Arab States (LAS). However, the outcomes of the meeting were not enough to rebuild trust between the two movements, as they remained theoretical and no tangible action was taken to implement them on the ground. This was reflected in the statements of Musa Abu Marzuq, who stressed that the implementation of reconciliation was in the hands of Mahmud ‘Abbas, calling for isolating external pressure from the Reconciliation Agreement as a necessary condition for its success.<sup>99</sup>

The gradual improvement in the relationship between Egypt and Hamas (beginning in the Spring of 2016) had a positive effect on Palestinian reconciliation. The Sinai security issue was the main impetus that drove the development of ties between the two sides. 2016 witnessed a shift in relations, when senior Hamas leaders made repeated visits to Cairo. On 12/3/2016, a delegation from Hamas met with Egyptian General Intelligence Service (EGIS) officials in Cairo several issues, and discussions were concerned with the security issue in the Sinai desert, border control with GS, Palestinian reconciliation matters, and the Rafah crossing. Hamas delegations then made repeated visits to Cairo, with Hamas stressing its readiness to comply with Egyptian requests regarding border control and vowing GS would not be the source of any security risks for Egypt. For its part, Egypt expressed its readiness to help move the Palestinian reconciliation issue forward. On 17/5/2016, Egyptian President ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi called on Palestinians to reunite and overcome their differences. However, Egypt’s Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri later linked the issue of lifting the GS siege to the restoration of the PA’s role

and its control over GS crossings.<sup>100</sup> Despite these Egyptian overtures, conditions had not yet ripened to enable the reaching of a resolution to the division.

In Doha, a third round of dialogue was held between Fatah and Hamas on 26/3/2016. According to ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, the two sides finalized a number of outstanding issues, predicting that Qatar would invite President ‘Abbas to oversee the final touches of the reconciliation process.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, Isma‘il Haniyyah said that Hamas had made significant progress in recent reconciliation talks with Fatah, but stressed that senior leaders and relevant institutions had to be consulted too.<sup>102</sup> It seemed that there were two key obstacles hindering the talks related to the political program of the National Unity Government, and the mechanisms for reintegrating the employees of the dismissed government in GS.<sup>103</sup> Hamas leader, Salah al-Bardawil said a new meeting was needed between the two factions in Doha to continue consultations regarding the reconciliation.<sup>104</sup> Thus, this phase of talks was characterized by purely procedural discussions, without the political space to move into implementation on the ground. The efforts appeared closer to “managing” the dialogue and various issues of contention, without any concrete breakthrough.

Before the end of May 2016, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad accused Hamas of not being ready to finalize the reconciliation, prompting a sharp response from Hamas which in turn accused Fatah of backing down from implementing reconciliation agreements, after President ‘Abbas objected to the outcomes of the Doha talks between the two sides.<sup>105</sup> In an attempt to defuse the tensions between the two sides, PIJ leader Abu ‘Imad al-Rifa‘i said his movement was in contact with the Egyptian leadership to conclude Palestinian reconciliation and reduce the suffering resulting from the GS blockade.<sup>106</sup>

Upon the return of media wars between Fatah and Hamas, attempts to bring the two sides closer and achieve a breakthrough and prevent full escalation returned. On 6/6/2016, Musa Abu Marzuq said a meeting would be held between the two sides in Doha to tackle outstanding issues, stressing that there were no obstacles hindering reconciliation.<sup>107</sup> A few days later, a delegation from Fatah led by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad arrived in Cairo to discuss reconciliation efforts with Egyptian officials, before travelling to Doha to resume reconciliation talks with Hamas. ‘Abbas Zaki, Fatah Central Committee member, said Fatah’s delegation would present its vision for a “shortcut” to reconciliation, especially in the wake of a speech by

‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi expressing his desire to sponsor and activate the reconciliation issue. For his part, Mohammad Shtayyeh said Fatah would work hard to achieve reconciliation and alleviate the suffering of Gazans.<sup>108</sup> On 15/6/2016, a third round of the dialogue between Fatah and Hamas was held in Doha. President ‘Abbas said the key to reconciliation was the elections.<sup>109</sup> On 18/6/2016, the two sides both acknowledged the talks had failed, exchanging blame for the outcome.<sup>110</sup>

After the Fatah Central Committee member and prisoner in Israel, Marwan Barghouti, called for the redoubling of efforts to restore national unity, sources close to Fatah said Egypt had been applying pressure to prevent the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement in Qatar in order to take control of the reconciliation issue themselves, to revive the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the initiative undertaken by the Supreme Follow-up Committee in the Palestinian Territories Occupied in 1948 to end the division in mid-August 2016, the reconciliation dossier remained in a stalemate, in spite of some statements being made, aiming to manage the dialogue, such as remarks by President ‘Abbas in September 2016, stressing his willingness to form a National Unity Government and extending his hand to Hamas to end the division.<sup>112</sup>

On 27/10/2016, President ‘Abbas met with Khalid Mish‘al and Isma‘il Haniyyah in Doha, in the presence of Qatar’s top diplomat Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani. They discussed ways to achieve reconciliation and agreed that it was the only way to protect the Palestinian national project. Hamas said that its leadership had presented ‘Abbas with a full vision for the implementation of reconciliation, stressing the importance of national partnership in various positions and responsibilities, whether in a national unity government, PLC, or PLO.<sup>113</sup>

However, sources close to the two parties said the meeting did not achieve any serious breakthrough concerning the schism. An informed source said the cause of failure was ‘Abbas’s rejection of any concessions and intractable positions on the key issues of contention.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas moved on into a phase of “managing the failure,” with each side blaming the other. In mid-November 2016, Musa Abu Marzuq announced that the talks had stopped, while ‘Azzam al-Ahmad said there was nothing new in terms of the reconciliation dossier sponsored by the Qatari Foreign Ministry.<sup>115</sup> On 5/1/2017, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad met with

Khalid Mish'al, Isma'il Haniyyah, and several Hamas leaders in Doha, to reactivate the reconciliation issue and discuss Hamas's participation in the meeting of the preparatory committee of the PNC meeting on 10/1/2017. However, that meeting transpired like previous rounds without any result, with one Palestinian source attributing this to the entrenched positions of the two sides and the insistence of President 'Abbas on his conditions that hindered the implementation of reconciliation on the ground.<sup>116</sup>

In mid-January 2017, representatives from Fatah, Hamas, and other factions held informal talks in Moscow concerning reconciliation and met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They agreed on the need to form a national unity government before holding elections, however this agreement was not received positively by President 'Abbas.<sup>117</sup>

In 2017, relations between Hamas and Egypt continued to improve. This had a positive effect on expediting reconciliation talks. On 23/1/2017, Haniyyah held a meeting with the EGIS Chief Maj. Gen. Khaled Fawzi, discussing the future relationship with Egypt as well as reconciliation with Fatah.<sup>118</sup>

Amid statements made by Fatah and PA leaders regarding the necessity of convening the PNC as soon as possible, in order to reform and reactivate the PLO, Fatah Central Committee member Jamal Muhaisen announced his movement would convene the PNC if Hamas refused to participate and abide by the Beirut agreement (10–11/1/2017).<sup>119</sup>

With brewing tension between the two sides, on 10/3/2017 Salah al-Bardawil stated that Hamas was looking for a new formula to manage government work in GS considering the failure of the National Consensus Government to assume its duties. This prompted a sharp rebuke from Fatah which claimed Hamas was preparing to split GS from the WB.<sup>120</sup> Hamas's formation of an Administrative Committee in late March 2017 poured fuel on the fire of the differences between the two sides, with President 'Abbas vowing to respond in an unprecedented manner to this step. Hamas's Spokesperson Hazem Qassim said this was an obstruction of reconciliation, calling on the National Consensus Government to assume its responsibilities vis-à-vis the people of GS.<sup>121</sup>

In response to Rami Hamdallah who called on Hamas to hand over GS to the "legitimate government," Hamas's Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum said the movement was ready to hand over ministries and government institutions in

GS on the condition that the government abided by its full duties towards the Gazans. However, this answer was met with a negative reaction from ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, who claimed Hamas was not ready to implement reconciliation.<sup>122</sup> In late April 2017, Salah al-Bardawil accused President ‘Abbas of discarding the Qatari reconciliation initiative, saying the Palestinian people had many important relationships internationally that ‘Abbas was ignoring.<sup>123</sup>

In this phase, Fatah and the PA executed their threats against GS in an attempt to force Hamas to hand over the Strip to the National Consensus Government. On 26/4/2017, Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh said that Fatah had taken a strategic decision to pursue all means to end the division,<sup>124</sup> in reference to the sanctions that were being prepared for GS. Hamas saw the sanctions as collective punishment, but President ‘Abbas justified the sanctions by invoking the need to pressure Hamas to achieve unity and end the division.<sup>125</sup>

In an attempt to overcome the blockade and the sanctions, a delegation from Hamas headed by the movement’s leader in GS Yahya al-Sinwar visited Cairo in June and held talks with the EGIS chief. He also met separately with a delegation from the “reformist movement” in Fatah led by Muhammad Dahlan, meeting four times including two meetings attended by Dahlan personally. These meetings led to accords meant to alleviate the blockade on GS and the crises affecting its beleaguered residents, including measures to bring in fuel to ease the electricity crisis. For its part, Fatah expressed concern over the accords reached between Hamas and Dahlan, claiming this would reinforce the bid to separate GS from WB.

Despite the controversy that surrounded the Hamas-Dahlan agreements and their political implications, Hamas stressed they were purely humanitarian and social and had no political dimensions. Mahmud al-Zahhar said that the accords with Dahlan focused on three issues: Reactivating the PLC, completing communal reconciliation, and activating the National Islamic Solidarity Committee as well as projects for the poor. For his part, Dahlan said during his intervention at the PLC via video conference, “We have made joint efforts with the brethren in Hamas that may allow us to restore some hope to the heroic people of Gaza.”<sup>126</sup>

These contacts raised a lot of concerns for ‘Abbas and the Fatah leadership, which expressed fear Dahlan was using GS to regain his influence in Fatah and the Palestinian interior. The talks also triggered a wave of objections within Hamas itself, as many segments within the movement perceive Dahlan and his

role in the Palestinian division very negatively, and because of his hostility to the “Political Islam” movements in the Arab world and his collusion in thwarting and repressing them. In early July 2017, reliable Palestinian sources revealed that indirect negotiations through three intermediaries between ‘Abbas and Hamas had taken place, with a view to convincing Hamas to reverse its agreements with Dahlan and meet the PA’s three conditions of: Dissolving the Administrative Committee; handing over power to the National Consensus Government; and agreeing to hold elections. However, Hamas rejected these conditions.<sup>127</sup> Isma‘il Haniyyah responded that Hamas wanted reconciliation and a national unity government as well as comprehensive elections, stressing that GS would never separate from WB.<sup>128</sup> As communal reconciliation efforts gathered pace pursuant to Hamas-Dahlan agreements, through the Communal Reconciliation Committee endorsed by eight out of 13 Palestinian factions, Fatah denied any participation in its meetings. In general, ‘Abbas’s efforts to circumvent the agreements through contacts with Cairo, Hamas’s limitation of contacts with Dahlan’s movement without meeting him personally, and the failure of the Dahlani camp to bring about any real difference in reducing the suffering and blockade of Gaza, led to reduced contact with Dahlan. Consequently, Hamas and ‘Abbas resumed their contact, amid a strong Egyptian desire to achieve a breakthrough in the reconciliation dossier.

In an important step, a Hamas-affiliated delegation in WB headed by Nasir al-Din al-Sha‘ir met with ‘Abbas in early September 2017, following health checks undergone by the Palestinian president. Al-Sha‘ir said the visit was to check on the health of the president, but that the issue of reconciliation was also discussed in the meeting, with positive outcomes.<sup>129</sup>

On 5/8/2017, reliable Palestinian sources revealed that Egyptian President al-Sisi had proposed an initiative to end the Palestinian division. The sources said both ‘Abbas and Hamas had approved of its terms, but ‘Abbas would later put forward a different initiative that was rejected by Hamas.<sup>130</sup> Hamas confirmed receiving the terms of the Egyptian reconciliation initiative, while ‘Azzam al-Ahmad denied President al-Sisi had proposed any initiative to end the division.<sup>131</sup>

Despite the impasse in the reconciliation dossier, in late August 2017 Yahya al-Sinwar said the Palestinian national project was in grave danger because of the continued division, proposing two visions to overcome the national crisis. The first entailed the re-formation of the PNC through elections or other means, before

developing the PLO to become a framework inclusive of all Palestinians. The second vision included the formation of a national unity government with full powers, representing the main factions, and governing both the WB and GS.<sup>132</sup>

On 12/9/2017, informed Palestinian sources revealed the presence of an Egyptian plan to push reconciliation forward, which came into existence following a visit by a Hamas delegation to Cairo, where Hamas said it had presented its own vision for ending the division and achieving reconciliation. At the same time, Musa Abu Marzuq claimed the US-Israeli “veto” on reconciliation had been removed.<sup>133</sup>

In an indication of progress on the issue, a Fatah Central Committee delegation led by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad arrived in Cairo on 15/9/2017 to discuss reconciliation efforts. This coincided with the presence of a Hamas delegation led by Isma‘il Haniyyah in Cairo to discuss latest reconciliation developments with Egypt’s leadership. Signs of a breakthrough began to emerge on 17/9/2017 when Hamas dissolved the Administrative Committee, calling on the National Consensus Government to come to GS to exercise its duties there immediately. Hamas expressed its readiness to agree on mechanisms for the implementation of the 2011 Cairo Agreements and their annexes.<sup>134</sup> After the PA government and Fatah welcomed the dissolution of the Administrative Committee, ‘Abbas placed new conditions for reconciliation, including rejecting any future role for Dahlan, refraining from repeating the experience of Lebanese Hizbullah in GS, and not receiving any financial aid for GS except through the National Consensus Government.<sup>135</sup>

For his part, the GS Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar said completing the reconciliation was a final strategic decision for his movement, saying the group was unified behind the decision. Al-Sinwar pledged to make “major concessions” to ensure the success of reconciliation, threatening to “break the neck of all those who do not want reconciliation, from Hamas or others.” He added “Hamas will embark on reconciliation and is very strong... the movement has built its strength not to govern Gaza, but for the sake of our people’s dream for liberation.”<sup>136</sup>

To complete Cairo’s efforts and conclude the Reconciliation Agreement, an Egyptian security delegation arrived in GS, on 1/10/2017. At the same time, and pursuant to the initial agreements reached in Cairo in September 2017, the government decided, on 1/10/2017, to form three government committees to take over control of the crossings, security, and official departments; address the effects of the division;

and exercise legal and administrative jurisdiction over GS.<sup>137</sup> On 2/10/2017, Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and cabinet members arrived in GS to take over their duties. Hamdallah convened the government and held a meeting with an Egyptian security delegation, vowing afterwards to tackle the catastrophic situation in GS and its crises and problems, and to end all manifestations and repercussions of the division.<sup>138</sup> On 12/10/2017, the Hamas and Fatah delegations officially signed an agreement to move ahead with reconciliation measures, with EGIS Chief Khaled Fawzi in attendance. The agreement stipulated finalizing measures to empower the National Consensus Government in Gaza by 1/12/2017 and find a solution to the public employees issue by expediting the work of the legal and administrative committees that would examine, arrange, structure, and integrate civil servants hired by the former Haniyyah government before 1/2/2018. The agreement also required finalizing procedures to hand over all of Gaza's crossings to the National Consensus Government by 1/11/2017 and convene a joint security meeting between PA security leaders and their GS counterparts, to discuss mechanisms for rebuilding the security forces. A comprehensive Palestinian dialogue session would be held on 21/11/2017 in Cairo to discuss major Palestinian issues.

Deputy Hamas politburo chief and head of the delegation to Cairo, Saleh al-'Aruri, said that both sides were committed to the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo in 2011. He stressed that focus would be on empowering the government with full jurisdictions in GS and WB, stressing that Hamas would spare no effort to make reconciliation a success.<sup>139</sup> For his part, 'Azzam al-Ahmad, head of Fatah's delegation, said that an agreement was reached on the specifics of empowering the government in accordance with its legal and constitutional powers, and the supervision of all crossings. Al-Ahmad said the presidential guard would be deployed along the GS border with Egypt.<sup>140</sup>

The signing of the Reconciliation Agreement was welcomed by Palestinian citizens and factions. However, Israel said it would not accept reconciliation unless Hamas disarmed, recognized Israel and handed over the captured Israeli soldiers in Gaza.<sup>141</sup>

On 16/10/2017, Minister Hussein al-Sheikh, head of the PA General Authority of Civil Affairs announced that President 'Abbas had signed a decision for open recruitment to restructure the security forces in GS. He added that a senior delegation from the security forces in WB would visit GS to arrange the security

issue in order to unify authority, laws, and armaments and build a democratic system.<sup>142</sup> In late October 2017, ‘Abbas told an Israeli delegation that he would not appoint any minister who did not recognize Israel in the National Unity Government, which would be formed under the Reconciliation Agreement with Hamas.<sup>143</sup> The latter responded by saying that this contradicted the terms of the Reconciliation Agreement.<sup>144</sup>

The start of reconciliation did not affect the continued sanctions on GS. Omar Shehadeh, PFLP representative in the PLO Executive Committee, revealed that President ‘Abbas had rejected a factions’ request to lift these sanctions, linking this instead to the full empowerment of the government in GS.<sup>145</sup> Despite welcoming the Reconciliation Agreement, Fatah ignored the call to lift the GS sanctions during a Central Committee meeting on 15/10/2017. The same notion was expressed in a statement by Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh, who stressed that the litmus test of the success of the reconciliation was the serious and full empowerment of the government in GS, just like in WB.<sup>146</sup>

Various factions condemned this position. Hamas stressed that the continuation of punitive measures against GS undermined reconciliation the PFLP said it thwarted reconciliation. PIJ said the goal was to subdue the resistance project in Gaza. The DFLP said the sanctions were not justified, and that the government had no serious intention to lift them.<sup>147</sup> However, President ‘Abbas ignored these criticisms, and stressed, on 24/10/2017, that he would not expedite the implementation of reconciliation despite its progress, stressing his absolute rejection of the “militia rule” in GS, and the imperative of having one authority, one law, and one source of armaments there.<sup>148</sup>

On 1/11/2017, the PA Crossings and Border Commission took over control of GS’s three crossings and announced that the Rafah crossing would be operational by mid-November. The two sides also agreed that 1/12/2017 would be the final deadline to empower the government to take over its duties in Gaza. However, the National Consensus Government, which effectively took over the running and supervision of the Rafah crossing, did not abide by the terms of the Reconciliation Agreement requiring the crossing to open in mid-November 2017. The government claimed this was due to the fact that it had not taken full control of security matters at the crossing and throughout GS—an excuse that did not find agreement among the parties.

Subsequently, Fatah and government leaders ramped up their statements claiming the government was not yet empowered to take over control of the ministries in GS. In this context, Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh accused Hamas of dithering over the implementation and expedition of the Reconciliation Agreement, saying that the level of empowerment of the government did not exceed 5%, at the administrative, financial, and security levels. He added that the government must take control of GS to the same extent as it has in WB.<sup>149</sup>

Statements stressed that the government would not resume its duties until after the security issue was solved, and its control was restored over the security forces operating in GS. Some statements even demanded the resistance's weapons be brought under the control of the "legitimate" authority in Ramallah under the slogan of One Authority, One Law, and One Source of Arms in PA territory. Speaking to Egypt's Capital Broadcasting Center (CBC) TV, President 'Abbas said "If someone from Fatah had illegal arms, I would detain him, and this is what I am working to achieve in Gaza. There must be only one legitimate source of arms." 'Abbas stressed that all weapons must be under the control of the PA, adding, "I do not want the experience of Hizbullah in Lebanon to be repeated."<sup>150</sup> In the same gist, Hussein al-Sheikh said, "Arms are not an organizational or factional issue. We will not allow it, and there will only be one source of arms and one law. Either we go in this direction, or let's not fool each other."<sup>151</sup> For his part, 'Azzam al-Ahmad said, "We have said clearly that the only arms should be the arms of the PA, meaning the legitimate authority. The government is the party responsible for security in both Gaza and the [West] Bank."<sup>152</sup> Hamas responded by saying that the arms of the resistance were not subject to debate or negotiations with Fatah, and that Hamas would not disarm.<sup>153</sup>

In early December 2017, Fatah and Hamas delegations met in Cairo, aiming to rescue the reconciliation process. An agreement was reached to implement all reconciliation terms, continue the process, and work to empower the government in GS.

The reconciliation process has proceeded very slowly, amid questions over issues like the PLO's future and the holding of elections, which would be the most important leap towards implementing reconciliation in the desired comprehensive manner.

### ***Fourth: Palestinian Factions***

Polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in the period covered by this report (2016–2017) reflect the continued polarization between Fatah and Hamas in WB and GS. More than two-thirds of respondents supported Fatah and Hamas, while the other factions collectively receive less than 10% of their support. About 25% are undecided. According to the center's other polls, Fatah in an election would receive 34–41% of the vote, while Hamas would receive 29–32%. Hamas's popularity in GS outstripped Fatah's popularity, while Fatah outperforms Hamas in WB. The polls also showed a decline in 'Abbas's popularity. In December 2017, 70% of respondents said they hoped for 'Abbas to resign, compared with 62% in July 2017 and 65% in June 2016. By contrast, Hamas outperformed Fatah in hypothetical PA presidency elections. If these were to be held (late 2017), with two candidates, 'Abbas and Isma'il Haniyyah, Haniyyah would receive 53% of the votes and 'Abbas would receive 41% (compared to 45% for Haniyyah and 45% for 'Abbas in July 2017, and 48% for Haniyyah and 43% for 'Abbas in June 2016).

There have been many changes in the internal organizational conditions of the Hamas and Fatah movements in 2016 and 2017, while the internal situations of the other factions have not witnessed any significant developments.

#### **Fatah Movement**

Fatah's internal situation was marred by tension throughout 2016 and 2017, due to the sharp polarization between 'Abbas' supporters and the movement's organizational frameworks, on the one hand, and supporters of the ousted Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, who formed a "reformist movement" within Fatah, on the other hand.

On 6/8/2016, President 'Abbas signed a decision to expel four Fatah leaders because of their relationship with Dahlan, namely MPs Najat Abu Bakr and Naima Sheikh 'Ali, and members of the Revolutionary Council Adli Sadiq and Tawfiq Abu Khussa. On 12/12/2016 'Abbas decided, to revoke the parliamentary immunity of five deputies in the PLC, namely: Muhammad Dahlan, Shami al-Shami, Najat Abu Bakr, Nasser Jum'ah, and Jamal al-Tirawi, in preparation for prosecution. On 14/12/2016, the Ramallah-based Anti-Corruption Crimes Court decided to jail Dahlan on charges of embezzling more than \$16 million during his tenure as

Palestinian security coordinator under the late President Yasir ‘Arafat. In early March 2017, the security forces in WB arrested a number of Fatah members who participated in a Palestinian youth conference organized by Dahlan in Cairo.<sup>154</sup>

Fatah held its seventh conference on 29/11/2016 and invited the factions to participate in the opening session. Both Hamas and the PIJ sent their representatives in WB. At the opening session of the conference, ‘Abbas was re-elected as the movement’s general leader. Khalid Mish‘al sent a message to ‘Abbas during the conference, in which he stressed the readiness of Hamas to implement all the requirements of partnership with Fatah and all factions, forces and personalities, to serve Palestinian interests.<sup>155</sup> ‘Abbas announced the political program of the movement for the coming years, in a speech before the conference on 30/11/2016. At the end of the conference, elections were held on 3/12/2016 with the participation of 64 candidates for the Central Committee competing for 18 seats, while 427 candidates competed for 80 seats in the Revolutionary Council. The results were announced the following day, where Fatah’s leader imprisoned by Israel Marwan Barghouti won the highest number of votes, receiving 930 votes out of 1,300, ahead of Jibril Rajoub, who came in second with 100 votes.<sup>156</sup> The new elected members of the Central Committee were: Ahmed Halas, Muhammad al-Madani, Sabri Sidem, Rouhi Fattouh, Dalal Salamah, and Samir al-Rifa‘i.<sup>157</sup> In its closing statement, the conference stressed the need to address and end the division and achieve national reconciliation. It also stressed the necessity of convening the PNC within a period of three months.<sup>158</sup>

As for Dahlan and his supporters, they opposed the convening of the movement’s seventh conference because, according to them, it would resize the movement to fit with “‘Abbas’s small ambitions,” as Dahlan phrased it. A number of Fatah leaders, most of whom had been expelled or suspended, held a press conference in Ramallah on 23/11/2016, in which they attacked the seventh conference, calling it a “circus” and disowning its organizers and outcomes. MP Ashraf Jum‘ah revealed arrangements for holding another conference for the movement, which he said would set up an alternative Central Committee and Revolutionary Council. MP Naima Sheikh ‘Ali stressed there would be “no recognition” of the legitimacy of the seventh conference, or its outcomes.<sup>159</sup>

An internal crisis broke out between GS Fatah branches on one hand, and the Fatah and PA leaderships on the other, following punitive measures imposed by President ‘Abbas against GS, including the reduction of the salaries of its employees in GS, and forcing many of them into early retirement. Fatah’s Gaza branch announced on 13/8/2017 that it would freeze its activities in protest against ‘Abbas’s actions and threatened further escalation unless the PA reversed its decisions regarding the early retirement of its employees.<sup>160</sup> In mid-July 2017, a new senior leadership commission was formed by Fatah’s branch in GS, with the addition of an advisory board to rebuild the organization and bring it back to the forefront.<sup>161</sup>

### **Hamas Movement**

There was no change in the structure of Hamas throughout 2016, but internal elections, held every four years, began in early 2017 to choose a new leadership and administrative bodies at different organizational levels. On 13/2/2017, Hamas announced the election of Yahya al-Sinwar as head of the movement in the GS, Khalil al-Hayyeh as his deputy, and Rawhi Mushtaha, Mahmud al-Zahhar, Fathi Hammad, Yasir Harb, and Ahmad al-Kurd, as members of the movement’s GS political bureau.<sup>162</sup> Hamas leader Salah al-Bardawil said the election of al-Sinwar followed a sophisticated and smooth democratic electoral process, held according to the law and the regulations in force, but stressed that al-Sinwar’s election would not change Hamas’s policy line.<sup>163</sup>

In April 2017, Maher Salah was reelected to lead the Hamas office abroad. Saleh al-‘Aruri was re-elected head of the West Bank office. The former head of Hamas’s politburo, Khalid Mish‘al, announced on 6/5/2017, the election of Isma‘il Haniyyah as his successor, as head of the Hamas politburo new electoral session. Haniyyah’s election was welcomed by the Fatah movement, PFLP, PIJ, and other factions and national figures and various segments of Palestinian society. Hamas also announced the election of the following members for the politburo: Musa Abu Marzuq, Saleh al-‘Aruri, Khalil al-Hayyeh, Muhammad Nazzal, Maher ‘Ubaid, ‘Izzat al-Rishq, and Fathi Hammad.<sup>164</sup> On 5/10/2017, al-‘Aruri was selected as deputy head of the movement’s politburo.

As for the political program, days before the end of his term, on 1/5/2017, from Doha, Khalid Mish‘al announced, Hamas’s new political document titled “A Document of General Principles and Policies.” Mish‘al said the new charter

reflected consensus in the ranks of the movement, and expressed its Islamic identity and Palestinian national character. He said the charter was based on a balanced approach between openness, evolution, and renewal yet without undermining the fundamentals and rights of the Palestinian people, mainly the Islamic and Arab identity of the Palestinian land; not relinquishing any part of it; not recognizing Israel; and affirming the Palestinian right to armed resistance, return, and full sovereignty over the land. Mish'al also stressed that Hamas believed in, and remained committed to, managing its inter-Palestinian relations on the basis of pluralism and democratic choice, partnership, tolerance, and dialogue.<sup>165</sup>

## PIJ

The PIJ has maintained its Islamic-resistance line, continuing to accumulate its capabilities in GS while attempting to reactivate its cells in WB. Its pursuit of an end to the Palestinian schism continued.

The PIJ put forward a ten-point initiative to rebuild the Palestinian national project. It accepted an invitation extended by Fatah to attend its Seventh Conference, and attended the meetings of the preparatory committee for the PNC held in Beirut in January 2017 “in order to establish a new National Council representing all national parties, including Hamas and Jihad.” The PIJ also congratulated Hamas on the election of Isma'il Haniyyah as the head of its politburo, and praised his inauguration speech later for being “patriotic and unitary, expressing the authenticity of Hamas as a national liberation movement.”<sup>166</sup>

The PIJ decided not to contend the local municipal elections but did give its members and supporters the freedom to vote for the candidates they chose. The PIJ condemned a decision by the Supreme Court of Justice in Ramallah to hold the elections in the WB alone without GS, saying the move deepened internal crises and distracted Palestinians from their causes.<sup>167</sup>

The PIJ continued its strong criticism of the Oslo Accords, the peace process and the PA's conduct. PIJ Secretary-General Ramadan 'Abdullah Shallah, in a speech at the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada in Tehran, stressed that the *Intifadah* was under siege not just by the occupation but also in the Palestinian home front. He asked President 'Abbas “How will we confront the settlement, Mr. President, with an Authority that protects the occupation?!” However, these remarks prompted Fatah to attack Shallah, saying

his statements reflected “unjustified political and moral degradation.” The PIJ responded by saying Fatah had no right to use that language against Shallah, “an affront to Palestinian leaderships.”<sup>168</sup>

In response to the security crackdown and violation of freedoms in WB, in early October 2017 the PIJ said this contradicted reconciliation, calling on the PA to unshackle freedoms and refrain from assaulting opinion-makers, intellectuals, and activists and guarantee human rights in WB.<sup>169</sup>

PIJ boycotted the PCC meetings on 14–15/1/2018, saying they ignored and bypassed all that had been agreed upon by Palestinians in the negotiations held in Cairo, Beirut, and Gaza.<sup>170</sup>

The PIJ participated in reconciliation meetings in GS, rejected sanctions imposed by the ‘Abbas government on GS, saying the goal was to subdue the resistance project in GS and target its spearhead.<sup>171</sup> In the context of commenting on Hamas’s moves towards reconciliation, PIJ said, “Hamas has given everything it has for reconciliation, and the ball is now in the court of Fatah and the PA.”<sup>172</sup>

## **PFLP**

The PFLP maintained its anti-Oslo stance, while confining its objection within the PLO framework. It supported Hamas’s resistance platform, but criticized its political and administrative performance in GS, rejecting a Hamas proposal in January 2017 to form an inter-factional committee to oversee the crossings. It stated that the role of the factions was to present ideas and initiatives that serve the citizens, and not to be an alternative to any executive entity. The PFLP stressed the most important clause of the inter-factional initiative was for the National Consensus Government to oversee the crossing.<sup>173</sup>

On 3/4/2016, the PFLP lashed out at ‘Abbas, urging him to resign. PFLP politburo Spokesperson Rabah Muhanna said the president had crossed all red lines and obstructed a decision by PCC to end security coordination with the occupation. Muhanna said if ‘Abbas would not resign, then all members of the Executive Committee should ensure he is held accountable for these mistakes and remove him from his post as chairman of the PLO Executive Committee.<sup>174</sup>

The PFLP held the PA responsible for the case of the assassination of Omar Nayef Zayed, one of its leaders in Bulgaria, accusing the Palestinian embassy staff there of complicity in the murder, raising questions about the role of the embassy

in the assassination or its failure to protect him.<sup>175</sup> PFLP supporters burned portraits and effigies of PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas and Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki, as well as the Palestinian ambassador to Bulgaria during a protest in Gaza City on the 40th day after Nayef’s death.<sup>176</sup> In return, ‘Abbas issued an order to suspend disbursements to the PFLP from the Palestinian National Fund (PNF) of the PLO for the second time in less than two years, without consulting the Executive Committee.<sup>177</sup>

The PFLP warned the already disastrous situation in GS would deteriorate to extremely dangerous levels because of the dispute between Fatah and Hamas, both of whom were warned against using the Gazans as “hostages and human shields” to achieve partisan and factional goals. It called on Egypt to put pressure towards convening the Palestinian Leadership Framework in Cairo.<sup>178</sup> The PFLP welcomed Hamas’s announcement of the dissolving of the Administrative Committee in GS, and welcomed the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement in Cairo on 12/10/2017.<sup>179</sup> It called for an end to all PA punitive measures against GS. PFLP representative in the PLO Executive Committee, Omar Shehadeh, confirmed that President ‘Abbas had rejected a request by the factions to lift the GS sanctions, during a meeting of the Executive Committee in Ramallah. The Front criticized the insistence of ‘Abbas and the Fatah leadership on continuing the sanctions.<sup>180</sup> Rabah Muhanna rejected remarks by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad claiming the factions had unanimously agreed in Cairo that there were problems facing the government’s resumption of its duties in Gaza, saying this was inaccurate and was part of a stalling tactic, and defended Hamas’s “flexibility.”<sup>181</sup>

The PFLP had signaled its intent to contend local elections in a “Democratic Alliance” list comprised of five leftist groups in WB and GS, including the DFLP, PPP, the Palestinian National Initiative movement, and the Palestinian Democratic Union (Fida).<sup>182</sup> However, the PFLP later decided to boycott the elections,<sup>183</sup> criticizing a ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice limiting the elections to WB. It called on the Palestinian government to tackle the ruling in consultation with the political forces to prepare a conducive climate for the elections away from politicization and said the ruling “deepened the division.”<sup>184</sup>

On 14/8/2017, the PFLP refused to convene the PNC in Ramallah without national consensus. It stated “the Council must pursue unity and consensus in line with the outcomes of the Cairo Accords in 2011 and the meetings of the Preparatory

Committee in Beirut.”<sup>185</sup> Despite the PFLP’s attendance of PCC meetings in January 2018, it continued criticizing the conduct of the PA and PLO leadership, expressing reservations on the decisions of the council, which it described as “grey,” and lambasted it for missing the opportunity of ending “the devastating path” of Oslo.<sup>186</sup>

## **DFLP**

The political conduct of the DFLP has remained close to that of the PFLP in terms of rejecting the Oslo Accords and their commitments; and confining opposition to the PLO framework albeit in a more lenient tone compared to the PFLP. The DFLP expressed support for the resistance platform, while criticizing Hamas’s political and administrative performance in GS. The DFLP criticized the Fatah-Hamas monopoly, saying it only produced further division and subscribed to rival regional axes. The DFLP called for a comprehensive Palestinian dialogue inclusive of all factions and forces in Cairo, under the auspices of ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>187</sup>

In early July 2017, the DFLP criticized the performance of the PA and its president, warning against what it said were schemes by ‘Abbas to seize control of the PLO and annex it to the PA.<sup>188</sup> In April 2016, the DFLP had expressed anger over ‘Abbas’s move to suspend its disbursements from the PNF.<sup>189</sup>

The DFLP called on ‘Abbas to lift the sanctions on GS, saying they were unjustified, made Palestinians cynical about the reconciliation despite negotiations, and indicated that the National Consensus Government is not serious about lifting them.<sup>190</sup>

## ***Fifth: The Questions of Freedoms and Palestinian-Israeli Security Coordination, and Their Implications on the Internal Palestinian Situation***

The PA and its security forces continued security coordination and collaboration with Israel in 2016 and 2017. The two sides held a number of security-focused meetings, at a time when the PA security forces further developed their effectiveness in confronting Palestinian resistance operations, without regard for the negative repercussions their practices caused on the internal Palestinian situation.

## Security Positions and Coordination Meetings

At the start of 2016, Israeli security forces praised the improvement in security coordination with their PA counterparts, saying a marked change has been observed in the way the PA dealt with the events of the Jerusalem *Intifadah* that erupted in October 2015 and the subsequent Palestinian attacks, most of which were lone knife attacks.<sup>191</sup>

Israeli Maj. Gen. Gadi Shamni, former head of the Israeli army's Central Command, revealed that the PA security forces were supplying the Israeli side with important intelligence to help crack down on the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, saying intelligence sharing was one of the leading facets of security cooperation between Israel and the PA.<sup>192</sup> For his part, Israeli army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General (Lt. Gen.) Gadi Eisenkot, speaking before the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv on 18/1/2016, suggested there was no reason to doubt the future of security coordination between Israel and the PA, saying it served a shared security interest. These remarks are a good summary of both sides' perspectives, favoring the continuation of security coordination, full delivery on its commitments, and future development of its mechanisms regardless of political stances and events on the ground.<sup>193</sup>

As for the PA, on 23/1/2016 President 'Abbas confirmed that security coordination with Israel would continue, suggesting the PA security forces were preventing Palestinians from carrying out attacks against Israel. This reinforced Israeli assertions regarding the importance and continuity of security coordination with the PA to contain the Jerusalem *Intifadah* and Palestinian resistance operations.<sup>194</sup> In late January 2016, the Israeli army command warned against the escalation of the Jerusalem *Intifadah* and the deterioration of conditions in WB, and the ensuing need to maintain security coordination with the PA, thus underscoring the key determinant of the PA-Israel relations.<sup>195</sup> Subsequently, a high-level PA delegation held a security meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The meeting was described as "positive" and produced an agreement on de-escalating the situation in Jerusalem and WB.<sup>196</sup>

As some PA voices called for suspending security coordination with Israel, following its repeated raids on PA territories in WB, Zeev Elkin, Israel's Minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Minister of Environmental Protection, on 11/2/2016 "emphasized that the PA's existence completely depends on the Oslo Accords, and

that security cooperation is a central part of those accords. Should it announce that it no longer keeps them, there will no longer be a basis for said existence and it would ‘evaporate,’ as he put it.”<sup>197</sup>

However, other Israeli ministers downplayed the importance of those Palestinian appeals, stressing ahead of the Israeli government meeting on 6/3/2016 that the PA would not suspend security coordination because “it protected the PA and its president Mahmud ‘Abbas more than it protected Israel.”<sup>198</sup> On 18/3/2016, Fatah Central Committee member Mohammad Shtayyeh said that PA security forces had held a meeting to discuss suspending security coordination with Israel. The PA was still waiting for Israeli clarifications regarding the incursions into PA-controlled WB territories, he added, otherwise the PA would declare agreements signed with the occupation null and void.<sup>199</sup>

Subsequently, a security meeting was held between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts in late March 2016. Secretary of PLO Executive Committee, Saeb Erekat, confirmed the meeting had been held to discuss the situation on the ground, but denied that Israel had offered a final response regarding their mutual agreements. This response would be an indicator for the PA leadership to whether continue the security coordination or not.<sup>200</sup>

However, all indications suggested the PA was not serious about its threats to end security coordination with Israel, and that they were just part of a political maneuver. This much was confirmed by the position of President ‘Abbas, who in the context of condemning Palestinian resistance attacks stressed the importance of continuing security coordination with Israel.

On 3/5/2016, Saed Erekat confirmed the end of bilateral meetings with the Israelis, without reaching an agreement regarding the ongoing Israeli army incursions into PA territory. This was while informed Palestinian sources confirmed the suspension of bilateral meetings and said this would be followed by stopping security meetings and then security coordination with the occupation.<sup>201</sup>

However, the Prime Minister of the National Consensus Government Rami Hamdallah confirmed later that security coordination with Israel continued unchanged, indicating that the PCC decision to suspend security coordination had not yet been followed by implementation mechanisms.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, Avi Issacharoff, The Times of Israel’s Middle East analyst, who fills the same role for Walla! website, said that security coordination between the PA and Israel was



evolving and prospering, stressing that the threats issued by the PA and some leaders regarding suspending coordination were unrealistic and were intended for media consumption.<sup>203</sup> This much was confirmed by the new Director of the Israel Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*) Nadav Argaman, during a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in the Knesset on 12/7/2016. Argaman said the PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts were coordinating closely to tackle Hamas, warning that the situation in WB was on the brink of exploding.<sup>204</sup> On a separate occasion, Argaman told the committee that the security coordination with the PA was proceeding excellently.<sup>205</sup>

In an important indication that the PA's very existence depended on security coordination with Israel, on 19/7/2016 Netanyahu said that the PA would collapse if the Israeli army and security services were to withdraw from WB. For his part, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon said that should Israel give up its freedom to operate in WB, the PA “won't survive.”<sup>206</sup>

In another indication to the continuation of political and security relations between the PA and Israel, the PA Supreme Court Judge and the President's Advisor for Religious Affairs and Islamic Relations, Mahmud al-Habbash, met along with a number of PA religious and political officials with Jewish rabbis at the office of the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. The two sides said they had agreed on the need to renounce all forms of religious violence, according to a statement issued by the organizers at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Despite the apparent political estrangement and the suspension of political communications between the PA and Israel, in late December 2016, President 'Abbas addressed a message of peace to the Israeli society, saying he would continue security coordination with Israel because it served a shared interest.<sup>207</sup> Throughout 2017, security coordination with Israel continued, despite statements by some PA officials, who attempted to insinuate that there was a limitation or downgrading of security coordination, however these were all unfounded assertions.

In this context, and at the end of a visit to Washington to prepare for 'Abbas's meeting with the US president, Donald Trump, in late April 2017, Head of Palestinian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj stressed that the PA's crackdown on Palestinian resistance operations was an “ethical commitment” towards Israel's security. Faraj denied intentions to downgrade security coordination with Israel at any time.<sup>208</sup>

In light of Israeli measures against *al-Aqsa* Mosque in mid-July 2017, including closing it to Palestinian worshippers, with a ban on the call to prayer and worship there, President ‘Abbas on 21/7/2017 announced the suspension of all contacts with Israel at all levels, including security cooperation, until Israel reversed these measures.<sup>209</sup> On 23/7/2017, ‘Abbas reaffirmed the suspension of security coordination with Israel, saying the situation at *al-Aqsa* Mosque was very difficult and that the PA would not gamble with the fate of Palestinians or take nihilistic decisions, but calculated decisions that would produce results.<sup>210</sup> For his part, in August 2017, the President’s Advisor for Foreign Affairs and International Relations, Nabil Sha‘ath, said that security coordination with Israel would not return to its previous levels unless some conditions were met, led by the reversal of measures at *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and ending daily incursions into PA-controlled territories.<sup>211</sup> On 22/7/2017, Palestinian factions welcomed ‘Abbas’s decision to suspend security coordination, and called for reinforcing the steadfastness of the Palestinian people to confront Israeli schemes.<sup>212</sup> However, they then lashed out at ‘Abbas when they discovered the lack of seriousness in his decision, after several reports of resumed coordination. In addition, Israeli Channel 2 reported that the PA had fully resumed security coordination with Israel, prompting the PIJ, Hamas, DFLP, and PFLP to issue condemnations. Hussein Mansur, member of the PFLP Central Committee, said that security coordination provided free service to the occupation, and it must be fully suspended as it harmed Palestinian national interests and Palestinian resistance.<sup>213</sup>

At an event organized by the Foreign Press Association in Ramallah, PA police chief Hazem Atallah affirmed that security coordination between the PA police and Israel largely never stopped.<sup>214</sup> Corroborating this, a Palestinian official source said on 6/8/2017 that communications between the PA and Israel were returning to their previous state, i.e., before the events at *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The source said President ‘Abbas had decided to gradually restore contacts with Israel, after certifying that Israeli measures at the mosque had been reversed.<sup>215</sup> However, PA Supreme Court Judge and the President’s Advisor for Religious Affairs and Islamic Relations Mahmud al-Habbash, said on 8/8/2017 that the PA conditioned the resumption of security coordination on the return to the 2000 status quo in accordance with the mutually-signed agreements.<sup>216</sup>

Echoing this decision, ‘Abbas said during a meeting with the Israeli Meretz Party, on 20/8/2017, that he was seeking to resume security coordination with Israel. However, he said Israel had not responded to this proposal yet, adding that he had instructed PA security forces to increase monitoring Palestinian entities that could stage attacks at Jerusalem’s holy sites.<sup>217</sup>

### **Facets of Security Coordination**

Security coordination between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts includes: Preventing and foiling Palestinian resistance attacks, whether by individuals or movements; sharing intelligence with a view to preventing resistance activities; and securing borders for Israeli soldiers and settlers entering the PA areas and ensuring their safe return.

At the start of 2016, Head of Palestinian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj said the PA had thwarted 200 operations against Israeli targets, arresting around 100 Palestinians planning such attacks, many of them having their weapons confiscated after the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, in the context of security coordination with Israel.<sup>218</sup>

Amid a rise in stabbings and ramming attacks as part of the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, in late March 2016 President ‘Abbas revealed his agencies had been searching schoolchildren to prevent them from carrying out attacks against settlers and occupation soldiers, claiming 70 knives had been seized from them.<sup>219</sup> On 9/4/2016, the Israeli website Walla! said the PA, in coordination with the Shabak captured a Palestinian cell in Ramallah that was planning to carry out attacks against Israeli forces, to shoot and capture soldiers or settlers from Israeli settlements close to Ramallah.<sup>220</sup>

Confirming the major role played by the PA security forces in thwarting resistance operations against the occupation, Avi Issacharoff, Israeli analyst in Walla!, wrote in mid-April 2016 that the PA had in earlier months thwarted dozens if not hundreds of attacks against Israel in the context of its commitment to security coordination with the Israelis. Issacharoff expressed surprise that Israel was denying the major security role of the PA on its behalf.<sup>221</sup>

According to data presented to government officials by senior officers in the Israel army’s Central Command, on 4/5/2016, PA security forces were responsible for around 40% of all arrests of suspected attackers in WB. This represented a

dramatic expansion of the PA security forces' security coordination effort, as three months earlier, they were responsible for only 10% of such arrests.<sup>222</sup>

As the PA deployed an increasing number of security agents in WB to contain the situation and prevent resistance attacks, Avi Issacharoff said on 10/5/2016 that PA police officers were conducting security operations in pursuit of anti-Israel elements in eastern Jerusalem.<sup>223</sup>

In turn, Israeli army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot revealed, following a meeting of Israel's political-security cabinet, details about the mutual roles of the Israeli army and PA security forces in their war on the Palestinian resistance in WB.<sup>224</sup>

Apparently, the security cooperation between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts has not always been smooth, and has witnessed pressures and political/security blackmail. According to a report published on 10/7/2016 on Walla! website, meetings were held between senior Israeli army officers and Palestinian security officials in which the Israeli side made threats and demanded the PA focus its efforts on confiscating arms and stepping up its security operations, or the Israeli army would increase incursions and operations in all WB areas.<sup>225</sup>

On 7/9/2016, Hamas issued a report documenting some abuses by the PA security forces against Palestinian activists and citizens in WB and GS in the context of security coordination with Israel.<sup>226</sup>

On 13/9/2016, Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* said the PA security forces handed over two Israeli female soldiers who had strayed into Tulkarm.<sup>227</sup> On 6/11/2016, Walla! website reported that the PA had provided intelligence to Israel that helped thwart a bombing attack planned for 4/11/2016 against Israeli forces in Hebron in WB, with one Palestinian youth arrested as the main suspect.<sup>228</sup> On 10/12/2016, PA security forces handed Israel three settlers who had snuck into Ramallah in WB.<sup>229</sup>

According to a report published on 3/1/2017, by the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK), PA security forces arrested and summoned 2,214 Palestinians in 2016, including 1,125 who were detained and 1,089 who were summoned for questioning. They former prisoners held by Israel and university students.<sup>230</sup>

In early February 2017, the PIJ accused PA security forces of arresting 16 of its cadres in WB, including former prisoners in Israel. It added that the PA was cracking down on its members on behalf of the Israeli army.<sup>231</sup>

On 27/3/2017, PA security forces handed Israel an Israeli soldier who had driven his military vehicle into the village of Sa'ir in the Hebron district by mistake, and on 12/5/2017, handed also two settlers who had snuck into the village of Qasra south of Nablus in WB. They had been surrounded by Palestinian farmers before the PA forces interfered to rescue them.<sup>232</sup>

On 8/6/2017, the PA security forces rescued an Israeli bus, which Palestinian youths attacked and threw rocks at, after trespassing into Nablus in WB. The bus was then returned to Israeli authorities.<sup>233</sup>

On 6/7/2017, the PA's Preventive Security Service (PSS) stopped a youth conference in Ramallah. Alaa 'Abed, a coordinator for the event, said that the PSS told them that holding the conference was prohibited, citing security concerns.<sup>234</sup>

In late July 2017, Walla! website quoted a high-level Palestinian security source as saying the PSS had arrested Hamas operatives in WB, who were attempting to escalate the security situation by planning attacks against Israel. The source praised the Israeli army and Shabak's handling of the unrest at *al-Aqsa* Mosque throughout the crisis.<sup>235</sup>

In the same context, Shabak's Director Nadav Argaman met in mid-December 2017 with the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and told them that the Shabak had thwarted over 400 attacks in WB. Argaman described the scale of defensive operations as "impressive." He added that in 2016, the Shabak stopped 344 major attacks. Reports said that the cooperation with the Israeli army, the Israel Police, and the Palestinian Authority, is what has made the effective prevention possible.<sup>236</sup>

### **The Impact of Security Coordination on the Internal Palestinian Situation**

Security coordination with Israel has undoubtedly left deep wounds in the Palestinian public conscious. It has produced many negative effects and backlashes that further fragmented Palestinian social fabric. Indeed, it is no secret that there are oppressive and arbitrary measures demanded by security coordination with Israel, including the arrest and torture in PA and Israeli prisons equally, the restrictions

on freedoms, and the crackdown on the right to resist. All of these affect broad segments of the Palestinian people and undermine their morale and social relations. Consequently, security coordination has been met with almost universal rejection by the Palestinians, given the threats, difficulties, and hardships it creates. Various segments of the Palestinian people, led by factions and forces, have persistently condemned coordination and called on the PA to end it without delay.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, the factions that dominate Palestine's political landscape spared no occasion to express rejection of security coordination, warning the PA of the consequences of continuing to coordinate with Israel against the Palestinian resistance and freedom fighters. For example, on 10/4/2016 Hamas accused the PA and its security forces of seeking to thwart the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, foil resistance operations, arrest freedom fighters, and pursuing a revolving door policy vis-à-vis security coordination with Israel.<sup>237</sup>

Fatah Central Committee member and prisoner in Israel Marwan Barghouti, in an interview from prison on 18/4/2016, condemned in the strongest terms the PA's insistence on security coordination with Israel. Barghouti said resisting the occupation was incompatible with security coordination, with one Palestinian entity resisting the occupation and another collaborating with it.<sup>238</sup> Barghouti urged the PA to end coordination, saying the Palestinian people wanted a national authority that paved the way for independence, not occupation and settlement.<sup>239</sup>

Responding to remarks by President 'Abbas in which he confirmed the continuation of security coordination with Israel, on 19/4/2017 Hamas said it was looking with great concern at these remarks, calling on 'Abbas to refrain from expressing positions that are at odds with the culture of the Palestinian people and their patriotic attitudes.<sup>240</sup>

For their part, Palestinian leftwing forces expressed extreme anger towards the PA leadership and the dominant factions in the PLO, after confirming knowledge that the PCC decision regarding the suspension of security coordination with Israel was being kept on the shelf. This was while PA security officials continued to hold meetings with their Israeli counterparts, and security coordination to thwart resistance operations also continued.

Leftist parties (PFLP, DFLP, PPP) said that the PCC decision regarding the suspension of security coordination with Israel was a maneuver that was not worth more than the ink it was written with.<sup>241</sup>

In July 2016, PA security forces carried out a wave of arrests and raids in collaboration with the Israeli army, affecting many Hamas and PIJ members in Nablus in WB, which was followed by strong condemnations from Hamas and PIJ. ‘Abdul Sattar Qassim, professor of political science at An-Najah University, said security coordination was nothing new, adding that the PA had tied its own hands while making the occupation’s security its unassailable priority.<sup>242</sup>

On 3/7/2017, a report by the Committee of the Families of Political Prisoners in the West Bank counted 273 assaults against Palestinian citizens carried out by PA security forces in June 2017, including mass arrests targeting resistance activities.<sup>243</sup>

In the wake of the Israeli arrests of Hamas leaders and MPs in WB, on 2/8/2017, MP Jamila al-Shanti said the arrests were the fruit of security coordination with Israel, adding that that Palestinians could change the existing equation in WB and turn the tables against the occupation and its collaborators.<sup>244</sup>

On 11/10/2017, the AOHR UK issued a report monitoring what it said were crimes against Palestinian citizens by the PA security forces and Israeli forces in the third quarter of 2017. The organization indicated that the double suffering, coming from both forces, was deepening with the continuation of killings, arrests, torture, and collective punishment of families of Palestinian prisoners and those killed in clashes with Israel. The measures taken against Palestinians were considered to be in full harmony with the policy of security coordination and collaboration with Israel. The report added that security coordination between the PA and the occupation forces was in itself a crime that violated the Geneva Conventions.<sup>245</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

The years 2016 and 2017 ended in an alarming climate in which the Palestinian political structure was not able to overcome its problems. There were no significant developments at the level of rebuilding the PLO and its representative and executive institutions. The PLO left 2017 as it had entered 2016: chronically weak, ineffective, and impotent, except those times when the leadership summoned it from clinical death whenever it needed to shore up its legitimacy or fill the gaps in representation.

The PA for its part was keen to only operate one of its branches, the executive branch, and concentrate its powers in the hands of the president, while deliberately suspending its legislative branch, which was supposed to form, monitor, hold accountable, and give confidence to the government.

Even the Unified Leadership Framework, which was supposed to play an active role in the absence of representative institutions, was not spared the obstruction. Thus, there is now an executive political leadership dominated by one Palestinian faction, controlling and steering the Palestinian polity, in a matter reminiscent of reactionary Third World stereotypes of governance, and one that is incompatible with the revolutionary nature of the Palestinian liberation project against the occupation that is supposed to mobilize the potentials and energies of its people.

Instead of revolution, the National Consensus Government preoccupied itself with the implementation of tough sanctions on a Palestinian territory, the Gaza Strip, in order to punish and subdue the other party to this “consensus.” The reconciliation dossier was “managed” rather than pursued to conclusion, in line with the policy of the dominant faction in government and the continuation of security coordination with Israel, despite strong opposition from an overwhelming number of Palestinians.

The closing weeks of 2017 carried signs of a breakthrough in the reconciliation track, following Hamas’s dissolution of the Administrative Committee, and the government taking control of the crossings and ministries in GS, the optimism receded as new demands were made against Hamas concerning the security forces in the strip and the arms of the resistance.

The PLO and PA leaderships did not seem to be interested in real national partnership and a transparent democratic process. In part this was due to their own composition and mindset; however, the Arab and international landscape, ever hostile to “political Islam” and resistance movements, has also made it difficult for these latter to be included in the Palestinian polity. Furthermore, there remains an urgent need to delineate the paths and priorities of the Palestinian national project (especially settling the issues related to the peace process and resistance), in order to build a formula for effective operation of Palestinian institutions. Moreover, there is a need for a confidence-building program between the rival Palestinian parties, led by Fatah and Hamas.



Perhaps Trump's decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem, and therefore the failure of the peace process in accordance to the Oslo parameters for the minimum requirements of the two-state solution, and the loss of hope regarding the transition of the PA into a fully-fledged state will all prompt the Palestinian leadership to reconsider its commitment to Oslo. Hence, it would pave the way for rearranging the Palestinian home front on bases that take into account the higher interests of the Palestinian people, accommodate the people's energies, and manage the struggle against the Israeli occupation in a more effective manner.

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## This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

# **Chapter Five**

## ***The Israeli Scene***



# The Israeli Scene

## *Introduction*

In 2016–2017, Israel enjoyed an almost unprecedented sense of strength and stability. In addition to strong economic performance and relative political stability, Israel enjoys comprehensive support from the US and regionally deals with a divided Palestinian environment and a weak, fragmented Arab environment, in addition to some Arab states' desire for normalization and establishing relations with Israel (often expressed covertly). Israel no longer fears the revolutions and movements of change in the Arab region following the fizzling out of the Arab Spring, and the armies of the region are no longer a potential threat to Israel's hegemony.

As the sense of existential threat diminishes, Zionist and Jewish religious extremism is growing, seeking to exploit the “historical moment” to impose their views on the “Jewishness of the state,” the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and on the peace process, while actively working on the Judaization of the land and the people.

## *First: The Internal Israeli Political Scene*

The years 2016–2017 witnessed a series of internal developments in Israel, the most prominent of which was the political decline of left-wing parties in favor of strengthening the right-wing, and especially far-right elements. Racist laws were passed, restrictive procedures against the Palestinians at home were applied, and the notion of “Jewishness of the state” was deepened at the expense of its “democracy.” This was in addition to the spread of sexual scandals among army and police officers and politicians. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government were under investigation in corruption cases of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

### **1. Decline of the Left Wing and Strengthened Far Right Wing**

During 2016–2017, the Israeli political and partisan scene witnessed a significant decline in left-wing party activity. Opinion polls<sup>1</sup> conducted by more



than one party show that the left in Israel is falling far behind the right, and more specifically the far right wing, which includes parties that form the current government coalition (at the time of writing) headed by Netanyahu, as well as illegal settlers. Polls confirm that the erosion of the left prevented it from forming a government or from joining Netanyahu's government coalition. The Zionist camp, which has historically included the left-wing Labor Party, underwent a change in its presidency. Its popularity declined and there were calls for a coup in its leadership and political orientation. In the party's internal elections, held early in the summer of 2017, Avi Gabay succeeded in defeating rivals such as Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog and Amir Peretz as the Labor Party chairman.<sup>2</sup> Gabay did not come from the ranks of the Labor Party, but from Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party, and he became the Environmental Protection Minister in Netanyahu's government. However, he resigned from Kulanu and joined the Labor Party to compete for the position of its chairman.

Nonetheless, the statements of Gabay, in whom many had put their hopes, were not too far away from the positions of the Netanyahu governments or the Labor Party. Indeed, he did not consider the settlements an obstacle for negotiations with the Palestinians, as if the Israeli settlement project were legitimate. This is in addition to his declared unwillingness to include the Arab Joint List<sup>3</sup> in the coalition government he would form if his party won parliamentary elections. There is no doubt that Gabay does not stray far from Israeli public opinion, and rejects any peace settlement based on withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967.

As for the right-wing parties, especially those in the government coalition, they have been greatly strengthened and their supporters have increased in number, especially the Jewish Home Party (*HaBayit HaYehudi*), led by Netanyahu's Education Minister Naftali Bennett. What this party promotes against the Palestinians amounts to racism, rejecting any solution or settlement based on the land for "peace" principle.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it tends toward the highest degree of radicalism, demanding WB annexation to Israel so that it can be directly subject to Israeli laws,<sup>5</sup> and it refuses to negotiate with any Palestinian party as it considers that there is no one qualified to do so. Bennett and Lieberman deal with Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas in the same way as they did with the late Yasir 'Arafat.<sup>6</sup> It appears that the Likud party is moving towards the same trend of "full sovereignty" over WB. According to Arutz Sheva, 800 members of the Likud Party signed a petition in

May 2017, including ministers in Netanyahu's government and Knesset members, such as Minister of Science and Technology Ofir Akunis, Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely, Ayoob Kara, Yoav Kish, Nava Boker, Norit Koren, Makhoulf (Miki) Zohar, Yaron Mazuz, and Yehuda Glick, among others. This petition is a direct endorsement of the law submitted by Likud member David Bitan to the Knesset, to begin to impose Israeli sovereignty over WB and to launch settlement building.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, following Palestinian reconciliation, Bennett and other extremist ministers pushed for rejecting it and for setting impossible conditions for any possibility of a return to negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

This means that the partisan scene in Israel is composed of both ends of the spectrum, the extreme right and the left-wing, and the center is not included as it was in previous decades.

If the Knesset elections were held either early or on time, it is expected that the right-wing would win more than 60 seats in the Israeli parliament, more than half the Knesset, and the Likud party would form the next government.<sup>9</sup> This brings us to Netanyahu, who has succeeded in preventing the emergence of a leader to replace him or to seriously oppose his leadership within his party, both in the primary elections or for the premiership. Netanyahu has managed to create an atmosphere around him akin to the one created by the leaders of the totalitarian parties in some formations. This inevitably implies the decline of democratic form within his party. In addition to that, a large number of Knesset members from his party support him and provide him with political protection. They are led by coalition chairman David Bitan, who uses all his strength and influence, and sometimes verbal and behavioral violence, to ensure a smooth path for Netanyahu. He introduced a law that prevents any investigation of a prime minister during his mandate. Of course, this proposed law helps Netanyahu after the widening investigation on several cases of suspected bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Bitan submitted a relevant proposal to the Ministerial Committee for Legislation in the government, but the Committee chairperson, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, took the bill off the committee agenda against a background of heated debate on this matter in Israel.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Racist Laws and Political Prosecutions

More racist bills were introduced to the Knesset by the right-wing parties both jointly or individually, including the “citizenship revocation bill,”<sup>11</sup> which would be applied against anyone belonging to a terrorist organization, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Evidently, this law targets Palestinians in Israel.

There were voices in the Knesset calling for the expulsion of National Democratic Assembly (Balad) members because they paid a condolence visit to three Palestinian families who lost their children, dubbed by Israel as “terrorists.”<sup>12</sup> They claimed that elected members of the Israeli parliament should denounce what the Palestinian “terrorists” had done, and some of them argued that members of Knesset (MKs) from the National Democratic Assembly were supporters of “terrorism.” Netanyahu said in a statement that the decision to expel MKs was to protect democracy, while MK Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint List, responded that Netanyahu was inciting the people against Arabs with the aim of delegitimizing them. Zionist Union leader Yitzhak Herzog joined the incitement led by Netanyahu and the right-wing parties that support him. The Knesset enacted the Expulsion Law in July 2016, under the claim of inciting violence and supporting the armed struggle against Israel, whereby an MK may only be removed by the vote of 90 Knesset members. This is the first time that a law has been enacted whereby members of Knesset may exclude other members.<sup>13</sup>

The increased frequency of resistance operations carried out by young Jerusalemites and others from outside Jerusalem, known as the “Knives *Intifadah*,” revealed the inability and failure of Shabak to pre-determine the identities of the perpetrators and to prevent their execution of the operations. This was considered a complete failure on the part of the Israeli intelligence sources.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, many voices were raised in Israel calling for the killing of Palestinians,<sup>15</sup> claiming that any doubt surrounding any Palestinian represents a preparation for a “terrorist operation” against Israelis. This indicated two things: first, some Israelis are overwhelmed and suffer from paranoia in their daily life, and that they are not safe, despite the widespread presence of security men and armed civilians in public places. Secondly, Israeli society tends towards extremism, fascism, and the legitimization of killing Palestinians under the pretext of self-protection and defense.

Rabbis in Israel (led by the Sephardim) rushed to issue a ruling allowing the killing of Palestinians carrying sharp objects (knives), with the chief rabbi Yitzhak Yosef saying, “it’s a mitzva [commandment] to kill him.” He also made the claim that Arabs are raised with the mentality and logic of violence.<sup>16</sup>

Such religious cover for the political and military occupation makes it possible to legitimize the expansion of the scope for killing Palestinians on the grounds that Israelis are victims, while Palestinians under occupation are the criminals. This image, circulated through the Israeli media to serve the policy of incitement, has contributed significantly to attracting more Israelis to the extreme right camp.

This prelude to the killing of Palestinians stemmed from the publication of a fascist-utopian idea, promoted by Netanyahu’s government that settlement building is not an obstacle to reaching peace with the Palestinians, but that it is in fact the Palestinians who refuse to sit at the negotiating table. This means that the Palestinians are the obstacle to the settlement expansion. Thus, the government finds fertile ground to promote its ideological and racist ideas, with opinion polls in 2016 and early 2017 showing an increase in the percentage of Israelis who support the expulsion of the 1948 Palestinians or the transfer of groups of Palestinians to WB. This approach is not limited to the religiously observant, but also to secularists, many of whom were previously part of the left or the center.<sup>17</sup>

B’Tselem–The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, called for an end to the occupation and an end to the suffering of the Palestinians by the occupation.<sup>18</sup> However, the presence and influence of this center has declined in Israeli circles.

Direct incitement against Palestinians in Israel does not only involve legislation and killing, but also includes social media. In return, and in order to “improve cooperation against incitement... to terror and murder,” as explained by Netanyahu’s office, Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked met with a delegation from Facebook.<sup>19</sup>

Other forms of racism, persecution and harassment against Palestinians have been manifested in Israel, as well as in the occupied PA territories. This is particularly true for Bennett’s statements following the Carmel fire in 2016. He pointed the finger indirectly at Arabs, saying “only someone who this land does not belong to would be capable of setting fire to it.”<sup>20</sup> Netanyahu had incited against the Arabs in the 2015 elections,<sup>21</sup> later apologizing and retracting his accusatory

remarks. Dozens of ministers, Knesset members, newspapers, websites and television networks voiced statements against Arabs. A number of Arab citizens were arrested, but the page was turned after some time and no indictment was filed against any of them.

Right-wing parties and the Ministry of Education in Israel are trying to impose the Israeli national anthem (Hatikvah) in Arab schools. However, this is still subject to debate and public controversy, even among the Israelis themselves, some of whom do not consider Hativkah to be an appropriate anthem for Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Minister Lieberman does not limit his threats to the Palestinians in Israel by suggesting moving them in groups, especially from “the Triangle” area whose center is Umm al-Fahm, to WB, as part of a settlement deal with the PA. In fact, whenever this minister goes through a domestic political crisis, he directs his wrath toward the Palestinians at home.<sup>23</sup>

In March 2017, the Israeli Knesset approved the “Muezzin Bill” limiting the Muslim call for prayer (*adhan*) via loudspeakers, after a heated debate in parliament, on the street, and in the press.<sup>24</sup> It emerged that public opinion in Israel was mobilized in support of this project.<sup>25</sup> Lawmakers claimed that the law sought to offer citizens some rest and was not directed against the Islamic faith. There is no doubt that the law is entirely racist, as there are numerous factors that cause noise in cities, villages and towns other than the *adhan*. The Joint List<sup>26</sup> considered the adoption of the law a declaration of war on religious and national identity, as part of the policy of harassment of Arabs in Israel.<sup>27</sup>

The Knesset enacted a law to speed up the demolition of Arab houses under the pretext of unauthorized construction. A ministerial committee headed by Deputy Attorney General for Civil Law Erez Kaminitz, and bearing his name, recommended a plan to demolish tens of thousands of homes in Arab villages and towns. The purpose of passing this law was to circumvent the judicial procedures used by homeowners in Israeli courts pending a solution to the building permit. This means that the law (approved by the Knesset on 5/4/2017)<sup>28</sup> allows the bulldozers of the Ministry of the Interior to carry out their duties without referring to judicial proceedings.<sup>29</sup> This is a violation of human rights in preventing individuals from accessing a judicial body to assist them in finding solutions to a crisis for which they are not responsible for. It is well known that successive governments of Israel confiscated millions of donums from Arab local authorities starting in 1948,

and for seven decades they have not stopped, thus shrinking the land owned by Palestinian Arabs. Simultaneously, there has been huge population increases in Arab towns, inevitably leading to a housing hardship. In addition, the construction area in these towns was not expanded.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Arab citizens are forced to build houses on agricultural land that is not included in the construction area, even though they violate the law. With this, the government of Israel has created a more severe population density in the villages and prevented an expansion similar to that of the Jewish settlements, promoting the stereotype that Arabs violate the law, and that Israel is a state of law. Moreover, Netanyahu froze the budget for reducing the Arab community's gaps under the pretext that Arabs violate planning and construction laws.<sup>31</sup>

The housing crisis stifling Arab towns has caused stress in addition to social and economic pressures, leading to the spread of crime in all its forms. Indeed, there has been an increase in killings, shootings at shops and houses, armed robbery, looting, family disputes, and property assault and burning. The police have not made serious efforts to deal with this issue and many criminals have not been found.<sup>32</sup>

### **3. State Comptroller Report on the Gaza War**

According to the report by State Comptroller Yosef Shapira,<sup>33</sup> the tunnel threat in the 2014 GS war, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then-defense minister Moshe Ya'alon had defined as "the highest level of strategic and significant threat," had only been presented to the Security Cabinet "in general and limited statements which were insufficient to clarify the severity of the threat and to establish the necessary level of awareness for the rest of the cabinet." "Netanyahu, in response to the report, said the calm situation in the Gaza periphery since the operation was proof of its success," Whereas Ya'alon commented that the report was "too political to be taken seriously."<sup>34</sup>

The central criticisms of the report were "the war was avoidable; at 50-days it was too long; and the Security Cabinet was not kept fully informed or consulted on big-picture strategy." The State Comptroller considered this to be a failure in preparing, managing, and disbursing for the battle, in addition to the dead soldiers and the missing persons, i.e., those who were captured in GS.<sup>35</sup>

In an attempt to burnish his public image, Netanyahu accepted the resignation of his Defense Minister Ya'alon,<sup>36</sup> in return for the Yisrael Beiteinu party joining

the government coalition and the appointment of its leader, Lieberman,<sup>37</sup> as defense minister. In practice, Netanyahu wanted to hold Ya'alon responsible, taking advantage of the deterioration in their relations in light of the report, and portraying him in the media as a defense minister who may possibly have a greater responsibility than his own.<sup>38</sup>

The resignation of Ya'alon removed one of Netanyahu's staunchest opponents, especially considering he was a former chief of staff in the Israeli army. This provided an opportunity to expand the government coalition, which was desperately needed for Netanyahu's government to have more support from the public. It was thus better to get rid of one minister and gain the Yisrael Beiteinu party in the government.<sup>39</sup>

There is no doubt that the report did not have a great impact compared to the Goldstone Report on the 2008/9 war on GS. It soon disappeared from Israel's daily agenda because of the scant coverage given to it by the Israeli media, which remained mobilized for the sacrosanct "security" in Israel.

#### **4. The Death of Shimon Peres and the Repercussions of His Funeral**

The Netanyahu government knew how to exploit the death of Shimon Peres, who served as head of the Israeli state. He also held many ministerial positions in successive Israeli governments, especially those formed by the Labor Party that he headed for a period of time. This was in addition to heading the government after Rabin was assassinated in 1995. Although Peres was one of his staunch rivals, Netanyahu prompted the Israeli media and propaganda to portray Peres's funeral as a ceremony for one of the world's greatest leaders, one of the most important figures who sought real peace, a great man of Israel. However, many claimed that Peres was the shadow of Ben-Gurion when he served as his special secretary, as well as the shadow of Rabin during his term as prime minister, and that he did not serve in the Israeli army. The funeral of Peres was exploited both politically and in the media by the Israeli government, as it was attended by dozens of kings, presidents and leaders from around the world. These included PA President Mahmud 'Abbas, who was treated disrespectfully when he was only assigned a seat after the intervention of Peres's family members.<sup>40</sup> This was a political message to 'Abbas: his presence was undesirable, he is not a partner for "peace" or any settlement, reflective of the negative stance taken by Netanyahu and a number of his ministers, including Lieberman.

Moreover, the Joint List refused to participate in the funeral or condolences<sup>41</sup> because it recalled the actions of Peres and his implementation of anti-Arab policies in Israel and in general, most notably his orders to bomb Qana in Lebanon and the killing of dozens of innocent children and citizens in 1996.

The Joint List's decision was met with various reactions locally, regionally and internationally. In Israel, seditious voices rose against Joint List members, dubbing them "terrorists." However, Joint List members enjoyed wide support from their Arab supporters, who saw them as their true representatives who had not forgotten the pain of their people. This despite the fact that a small number of Arabs talked about offering condolences. On the Arab level, it proved the steadfastness of the Palestinian society, which continued to resist all forms of persecution, policies and restrictions, and remained committed to its legitimate national rights, even in such a case. Their refusal to attend the funeral of Peres sent strong messages to all Arab leaders, kings and princes who used to rush to meet with Peres in his capacity as a "peace advocate." Hence, they refused use the tragedies of the Palestinian people to promote the image of Peres as he had been involved in the perpetuation of these crimes for decades.

The development of the events related to Peres's funeral revealed that the Israelis supported their government in all its forms and did not accept the Arab deputies' abstention from participating in the said funeral. Netanyahu sought to make the Arab deputies appear inhumane and devoid of sympathy, and this image was supported by large segments of Israeli civil society.

### **5. Increasing the "Jewishness of the State" at the Expense of its Democracy**

At a time when extremism among Israelis increased, with nearly 60% expressing anti-Arab sentiment and the expulsion of Arab MKs from the Knesset,<sup>42</sup> the government and its institutions intensified efforts to stress the "Jewishness of the state." More religious events and themes related to Jewish heritage were included in school curricula and educational books. Such moves were not only initiated by religious parties, based on religious and biblical principles and rules, but secular movements also insisted on highlighting the "Jewishness of the state," stressing heritage and form more than the religious aspect.

More Jewish presence was felt through the approval of more kosher food, and the banning of the opening of shops on Saturdays and Jewish holidays.<sup>43</sup> Huge budgets were allocated to bring American Jews closer to Judaism, with the hope that they would become new immigrants to Israel.

Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked sought to bolster Jewish identity through a set of laws highlighting Jewish heritage, which are expected to further marginalize the Palestinian Arab language, culture, and education.<sup>44</sup>

The “Jewishness of the state” was been discussed in Knesset several times. In 2017, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation in the Knesset passed a preliminary reading of the Nationality Bill. It will go to the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee to be prepared for a first reading vote. The legislation must pass three more parliamentary votes to become law.<sup>45</sup> According to this law, “the right of national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people,” “Hebrew is the state language,” while “Arabic shall have a special standing in the state,” where those who “speak Arabic shall have access in their own language to State services.”<sup>46</sup> Such a law can undoubtedly be classified as racist, akin to those laws that were in force in South Africa during Apartheid.

In an in-depth look at the content of this law, we see that the principle of exclusion and marginalization adopted by Israeli governments, especially the current Netanyahu government, is being effectively applied vis-à-vis Arab citizens. This means that Israel, which boasts of its democracy, is not at all interested in recognizing that Palestinian Arabs as citizens with equal rights and privileges. What the government wants is to apply double standards, one for the Jews (the “Jewish state”), and the other for the Arabs, who are not a single entity but represent a group of non-Jewish religious denominations. This is an outgrowth of the Balfour Declaration, which responded to the whims of colonialist Zionist thought.

In addition, the Joint List proposed a law to recognize the Palestinians of 1948 as a national minority in Israel, because the current law only recognizes them as religious communities. However, this law was not ratified by the majority of the Knesset.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, the Israeli government, which accepted the recognition of Arabic as an official language alongside Hebrew and English as soon as it was established in 1948, has tended in recent years to withdraw such recognition of Arabic and to deal

with Arabs as mere speakers of Arabic, not as a people with a specific nationality and characteristics, primary among which is their language.

Such a step was vehemently rejected by the Joint List, Arab and Leftist Jewish activists and leaders, in addition to some international bodies, all considering it rightist extremism reminiscent of a totalitarian regime.

## 6. Moral Scandals

The case and trial of former Israeli President Moshe Katsav was definitely not the last in a series of sexual harassment and rape cases by politicians, state officials, and police and military leaders. An internal Israeli army survey revealed that one in six female soldiers say they have been sexually harassed during their military service.<sup>48</sup> Women and soldiers submitted several complaints to the competent authorities, including the Police Investigation Unit and the Army. Statistics showed a 20% increase in the number of military complaints about sexual harassment in 2016, where a quarter of complaints in the army were directed against senior officers. Prominent among the officers was Ofek Buchris, who took up a senior position in the Israeli army and was the head of the Command and Staff College. Many believed that had it not been for the sex scandal, he would have been one of the strongest candidates for the post of chief of staff of the Israeli army.<sup>49</sup>

According to Israeli army support center data, only about 10% of sex crime allegations eventually reach the point of an investigation or legal action.<sup>50</sup> It was revealed on 6/3/2017 that 227 Israeli soldiers were accused of committing sexual offenses against those who served under their command during the 2008–2016 period. It was also revealed that 205 cases were tried and 95% of the accused were convicted.<sup>51</sup>

On 15/3/2017, a large-scale corruption operation involving the Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) was uncovered. 13 people were arrested, including a retired Brigadier General, Amal Asad, who is a member of the Board of Directors, following a covert operation lasting several months by the Israel Police Lahav 433 national investigation unit together with the Ministry of Defense director of security of the defense establishment and Israel Tax Authority Tel Aviv office investigators. According to the limited details published, “The main suspicion is that IAI employees received bribes and favors from private companies providing services to the government owned defense manufacturer (their suppliers) in

exchange for promoting the interests of these companies,” in addition to aggravated fraud, money laundering and theft by a public employee.<sup>52</sup>

On 3/9/2017, it was revealed that the police arrested the former commander of the navy’s elite Shayetet 13 commando unit, Reserve Brigadier General Shay Brosh, on charges of suspected involvement in the purchase of German Dolphin submarines, which was dubbed Case 3000.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, complaints were made against a significant number of senior officers in the Israeli police about sexual harassment and abuse of female soldiers and police officers, involving almost all the high command officers. Thus, the Police Inspector-General stripped these officers of their rank, sending some to retirement or dismissing them, and keeping some of them, who stayed despite the humiliation to which they were subjected. The Inspector-General also redrafted regulations to prevent sexual harassment in all its forms.

Although this issue was a big story in 2016, it emerged in 2015 through the scandal of high-ranking police officers.<sup>54</sup> There remains no explanation for it other than the low standard of ethics in the ranks of officials of the various security forces and their disregard of strict regulations.

There is no doubt that this pervasive occurrence in the ranks of the police has helped erode the trust of the Israeli public in its emergency services.<sup>55</sup> The public was satisfied with the performance of the police in general. However, the Arab public in Israel was not at all satisfied, especially with the continued killing of people in Arab villages and towns, the persistence of the firing of during events, and the behavior of the police in Negev during the events of the villages of Umm al-Hieran<sup>56</sup> and al-‘Araqib.<sup>57</sup>

## **7. Netanyahu and his Government Investigated for Corruption and Bribery**

Lahav 433 is the most important investigation unit in the police and is specialized in cases of corruption, bribery, and money laundering. In 2017, it investigated a large number of state figures, including Netanyahu, some ministers, and deputies, as well as executives and former senior Israeli army officers, as well as officials in military industries, notably the air force.<sup>58</sup> The individuals mentioned showed an apparent disregard for the public interest. In addition to Netanyahu’s connection to a number of corruption cases, many ministers were also involved, notably Interior

Minister Aryeh Deri. This was not his first time, as he had been accused in the past of receiving bribes and even received a prison sentence, but he returned to the political arena again as the leader of the Shas party. Yuval Steinitz, Minister of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources, and Minister of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services and others were also investigated.

The most prominent investigations since 2016 involve cases 1000, 2000, and 3000.<sup>59</sup> What are these cases about?<sup>60</sup>

#### **a. Case 1000**

This case is also known as the Gifts-For-Favors affair and involves an investigation by the Israeli police, starting in December 2016, against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for allegedly receiving expensive gifts from businessmen, notably Arnon Milchan. Netanyahu was allegedly offered expensive champagne, cigars, jewelry and clothing, worth hundreds of thousands of shekels in return for intervening on his behalf with the then-US Secretary of State John Kerry to successfully obtain a 10-year US residency visa for him. The issue is quite sensitive, as Milchan declared in his testimony that Netanyahu and his wife were the ones who solicited those specific gifts.<sup>61</sup> He added that his gifts were of a friendly nature, bereft of any pursuits. An important turning point occurred when the Prime Minister's chief of staff Ari Harow announced that he had taken a plea bargain to become a state's witness in exchange for lighter sentences in Cases 1000 and 2000.

#### **b. Case 2000**

This case is also known as the Netanyahu-Mozes case, a criminal investigation launched by Lahav 433 in January 2017 on charges of negotiating sympathetic coverage of Netanyahu in return for the weakening of *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper competitor *Israel Hayom*. Netanyahu and Arnon Mozes, the publisher of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, have been questioned under caution. According to what was published, the scandal was uncovered by police investigators when they listened to phone call recordings on Ari Harow's phone when they were investigating Case 1000. The recordings were initiated and approved by Netanyahu, including those with Mozes.

The issue is a suspected conspiracy between Netanyahu and Mozes against a third party in favor of ensuring non-critical media coverage of Netanyahu. As of the writing of this chapter, investigations have not been completed.

### **c. Case 3000**

Dubbed the Submarines Affair, this case is an ongoing (at the time of writing) criminal investigation conducted by the police crime-fighting unit Lahav 433 since early 2017. Revealed by journalist Raviv Drucker in November 2016, this scandal involves suspicions related to the bidding for the purchase of Dolphin submarines from ThyssenKrupp, a German multinational conglomerate.

The case revolves around the steps taken during the purchase of submarines for the Israeli navy,<sup>62</sup> including a submarine in 2012 and a missile carrier. The contract was cancelled, and negotiations began instead with German shipbuilder ThyssenKrupp to build heavier and bigger ships than in the original tender specifications. This is in addition to the initiative to buy three submarines for the Navy to replace older submarines of the same Dolphin-class.

After the scandal was exposed, State prosecutor Shai Nitzan decided, following consultation with the attorney general, that it was time to start a criminal investigation instead of examining the findings. Investigations branched out during the summer of 2017 and included many politicians, businessmen, and lawyers connected to Netanyahu and his ministers.

Thus, a number of officials were investigated, such as former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, Defense Ministry Director-General Dan Harel, Knesset members and former ministers, including former Finance Minister Yair Lapid and the director of the Ministry of Defense's procurement department, among others. The signing of the purchase deal with the German company was delayed pending the investigation findings. Police arrested a number of those involved in the scandal, including former ministers and businessmen, and imposed house arrests and a travel ban. The investigation is ongoing at the time of writing.

In conclusion, Netanyahu and a large number of ministers, senior and current government officials, businessmen, lawyers and executives in major companies in Israel, are suspected of involvement in financial and administrative corruption in the three cases. In other words, Netanyahu's government worked under constant investigation to such an extent that Coalition Chairman David Bitan suggested adopting a French law under which a prime minister would not be investigated while in office. Parties and media outlets opposed this law claiming it "jeopardizes democracy in Israel" and strengthens Netanyahu's "dictatorship", giving the regime absolute power.<sup>63</sup>

These cases will expose more individuals involved in corruption, bribery, and money laundering in Israel and abroad under the cover of the government. In addition, they may oust the prime minister from office if he goes to early elections, which are more likely than ever before because of these criminal cases and internal policies.

## **8. Development of the Settlement Project Domestically**

There were diverging views on the settlement building issue within the Israeli government, which approved, on 9/10/2016, the granting of governmental powers with regard to settlements to the Settlement Division. This meant granting it full power to resume building settlements, especially in WB.<sup>64</sup> In November 2016, the Israeli Ministerial Committee for Legislation unanimously approved the controversial Legalization Bill, which would authorize settlement outposts established in the occupied WB. Voting was rushed through the Ministerial Committee for Legislation in an attempt to prevent the evacuation of the outpost of Amona in WB by the end of 2016. This issue caused a disagreement between Netanyahu, who tried to delay the vote, and militants within his ruling party, The Likud. However, Naftali Bennett, the education minister who heads the radical Jewish Home party, rallied support for the vote. The anti-settlement Peace Now movement condemned the vote, while Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit “wanted to push off the vote, due to the legal tension it would create between the Ministerial Committee for Legislation and the High Court of Justice.”<sup>65</sup>

The legal adviser to the Israeli government expressed surprise at this bill, although his legal position was clear, and confirmed, as he presented a document to the ministers, that the law was contrary to Israeli law because it legalized the confiscation of privately-owned land without indicating that this land is Palestinian property. He stressed that the legitimization of settlement outposts remained contrary to Israel’s commitment to international law.<sup>66</sup>

The Israeli government coalition succeeded in passing the Legalization Bill in the first reading in the Knesset, and the first version of the bill passed the first reading by 58 votes, including Netanyahu’s, to 50, including the Arab Joint List, Meretz, the Zionist camp, and Yesh Atid. After rumors about the intention of Moshe Kahlon, the Finance Minister and leader of the Kulanu party, to abstain from voting for the bill, Naftali Bennett, whose party submitted the bill, threatened to vote against any laws subsequently proposed by the Israeli government.<sup>67</sup>

In February 2017, the Knesset passed the second and third readings of the proposed bill, receiving 60 votes in favor to 52 against, with eight MKs not present in the plenary for the vote. Opposition leader Yitzhak Herzog warned that the law would cause indictments against Israeli soldiers in the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. Minister Ofir Akunis said, “The vote was not just over this specific law, but rather about the right of the Jewish people to live in Israel. ‘This whole debate is based on one question: Who does this land belong to?’ he told the plenary.”<sup>68</sup> It should be noted here that Israel used prevailing conditions to initiate the settlement Legalization Law, with the aim of implementing another series of expropriations of private Palestinian land. The law, passed by the Israeli Knesset,<sup>69</sup> legislates thousands of illegal settlement housing units on Palestinian land in WB.<sup>70</sup>

Netanyahu declared on 6/6/2017 that his government would continue to build in the settlements and that it was planning further construction throughout WB. “We will continue maintaining and strengthening the settlement enterprise,” and “I have the privilege to be the first prime minister in decades to build a new settlement in Judea and Samaria,” he said.<sup>71</sup> He also spoke of a plan to resettle the evacuees of Amona in a new location in WB,<sup>72</sup> adding, “I am doing what is necessary to preserve Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, and I assure you, no one has done more.”<sup>73</sup>

In a press conference announcing the approved construction of the settlement, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated that the Israeli government was “working at a pace not seen since 2000” to further approve construction in the territories.<sup>74</sup>

Internal criticism of Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government intensified after it approved plans to build thousands of settlement units in WB and East Jerusalem. Tzipi Livni, a Knesset member from the opposition camp, said in October 2017 that the settlements would not bring security to Israel, but rather make the state vulnerable to boycott, and that it was now the prime reason for an Israeli boycott by various countries and organizations, politically and economically. Livni pointed out that Israel had been subjected to international criticism largely because of those settlements. “I would not send more couples [to live there] because of the potential that some of these secluded settlements [would have to] be evacuated in the future,” she added. As for Netanyahu, she said, “Netanyahu is a politician

and not a statesman, what runs this government today are politics and the policy of Bayit Yehudi [Jewish Home] party because Netanyahu wants to appeal to that [support] base.”<sup>75</sup>

## 9. The Jerusalem *Intifadah* and Its Implications

Some call it the *Third Intifadah*, some the *Knife Intifadah*. The upsurge in resistance was a reaction to the increasing pressure from the Israeli Right and settler groups applied on the government to visit *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The PA was unable to prevent these incursions and the general Arab position was eroded. Young Palestinians despaired because of the narrow political horizon, and there were ongoing constraints, political prosecutions, and administrative detentions by the Israeli occupation. Thus, young people began knife attacks on Israelis in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, among other cities. The Shabak did not have prior knowledge of the perpetrators of such operations, as they were individual actions, not in the framework of cells or factions. These operations increased in 2016 and early 2017 at military checkpoints, bus and train stations, and large shops.

These operations worried the Israeli public, especially as they took place during the day. Police and the army tightened their grip on Palestinians, preventing thousands of them from crossing the checkpoints. Israeli security forces stated that anyone could be killed if they were suspected of carrying a sharp object. The soldier Elor Azaria opened fire on the perpetrator of a Hebron operation, Abdel-Fattah al-Sharif, who was seriously wounded then shot in the head, even though he was no threat to anyone. Because the incident was filmed, and the soldier's behavior was disseminated globally, the Israeli army leadership rushed to bring him to trial on the grounds that he violated military values.<sup>76</sup> This was while dozens of murders and assassinations had previously been carried out by soldiers who were not prosecuted because no Palestinian or foreigner caught them on film.

There was a wide debate in the media, social media, and the Israeli public about Azaria's behavior and the media was mobilized to serve the position of the army. Azaria was sentenced to 18 months in prison and a demotion to private after he was convicted of manslaughter.<sup>77</sup>

This incident and trial reflect how quickly the army acts when it needs to. This was in addition to increasingly frequent cases of killing Palestinians under the pretexts of self-defense, protection of Israeli citizens and addressing what Israel

calls “Palestinian terrorism.” It also reflects the level of hatred among the soldiers towards the Palestinian people whose lives they consider to be worthless.<sup>78</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Jerusalem *Intifadah* does not necessarily Palestinians being in a state of despair. Rather, it reflects the Palestinians’ adherence to their right to their land and their willingness to confront the occupation, while Israeli reactions indicate the low moral standards of the Israeli army.

## ***Second: Demographic Indicators***

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimated Israel’s population at the end of 2017 at 8.796 million, including 6.558 million Jews. Jews therefore comprised 74.6% of the population in 2017, compared with 8.629 million people, including 6.446 million Jews, or 74.7% of the population at the end of 2016. As for Arab citizens, including the residents of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, their number was estimated at 1.838 million in 2017, 20.9% of the population, compared with 1.797 million in 2016 or 20.8% of the population (see table 1/5). If we remove the population of East Jerusalem (nearly 342 thousand<sup>79</sup>) and the Golan (nearly 25 thousand), the number of 1948 Palestinians (i.e., those who are living in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948) was about 1.47 million in 2017, or about 16.7% of the population.

In 2017, CBS classified some 400 thousand persons as “others”, or 4.5%, compared to about 386 thousand in 2016. These “others” were mostly immigrants from Russia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who are not recognized as Jews, or who tend to deal with Judaism as a nationality rather than a religious affiliation, or who are non-Jews or non-Arab Christians.

It is difficult to determine the exact numbers of Jewish settlers in WB, as Israeli statistics deliberately do not mention the number of settlers in East Jerusalem. Some discretion is also used regarding the rest of WB, perhaps to ease the Palestinian and international reactions to the settlement programs. Available information indicates that the number of settlers in WB increased between 2006–2016 by 4.6% annually, more than double the estimated 2% Israeli population growth rate. According to Israeli sources, the number of settlers in WB (excluding East Jerusalem) in early 2018 reached 436 thousand, an increase of 3.4% in 2017, compared to an increase

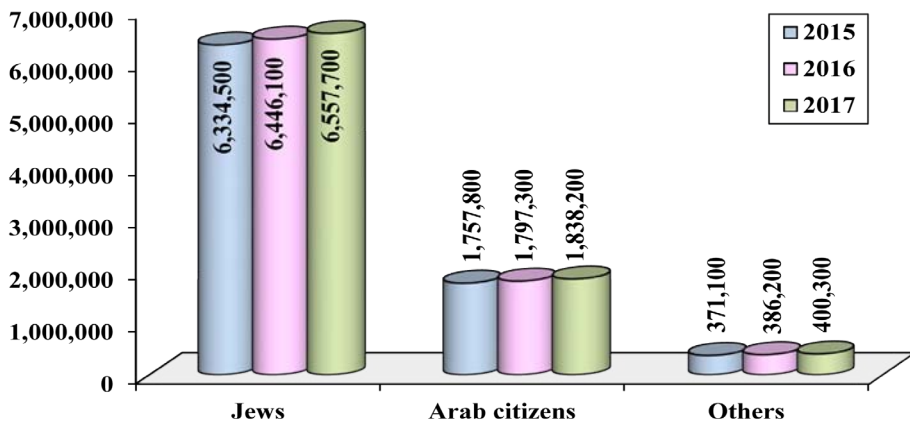
of 3.9% in 2016. Also, most sources indicate that the number of East Jerusalem settlers exceeded 200 thousand, while Arutz Sheva (Channel 7) indicates that the number of Jewish settlers reached 375 thousand in East Jerusalem in early 2016.<sup>80</sup>

According to ARIJ database for 2015, a total of 750 thousand settlers reside in WB (including Jerusalem,) which means that it reached about 800 thousand in early 2018, if we apply the average increase of settlers.<sup>81</sup>

**Table 1/5: Population of Israel 2011–2017<sup>82</sup>**

Year	Total population	Jews	Arabs (including the population of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights)	Others
2011	7,836,600	5,898,400	1,609,800	328,400
2012	7,984,500	5,999,600	1,647,200	337,700
2013	8,134,500	6,104,500	1,683,200	346,800
2014	8,296,900	6,219,200	1,720,300	357,400
2015	8,463,400	6,334,500	1,757,800	371,100
2016	8,628,600	6,446,100	1,797,300	386,200
2017	8,796,200	6,557,700	1,838,200	400,300

**Population of Israel 2015–2017**



In 2015 and 2016, there was a 2% population growth rate in Israel, which has remained the approximate rate since 2003, noting that 178,723 persons and 181,405 persons were born in Israel in 2015 and 2016, respectively,<sup>83</sup> according to the latest statistics at the time of writing this book.

According to CBS, 26,308 immigrants came to Israel in 2017, compared to 25,977 and 27,908 in 2016 and 2015 respectively (see table 2/5). These figures show a relative stability in the immigration rate during 2017 and 2016, compared to the preceding decade, but they remain minimal compared to the 1990s. This comes after the diminution of the numbers of Jews willing to migrate, and after most Jews abroad went to developed countries in North America and Europe, so Jews do not have an incentive to migrate on a large scale.

It is worth noting that immigration to Israel coincided with a continued emigration flow. According to CBS, 16,700 holders of Israeli passports left Israel in 2015, while 8,500 returned. This means that the net emigration rate was about 8,200 people.<sup>84</sup> According to CBS, 554–589 thousand Israeli residents were residing outside Israel at the end of 2014, not counting their children born abroad. As for the Israelis who left Israel and never returned during the 1948–2015 period, Israeli estimates are that they number 720 thousand, not including their children born abroad.<sup>85</sup>

It should also be noted that during the 1990–2014 period, 526,600 Israelis left Israel for a year or more; of these, 229,700 people returned to Israel during the same period while 296,900 remained abroad. Among those who left Israel in the 1990–2014 period were 139,600 immigrants from the former Soviet Union; 30,100 of them returned to Israel, while 109,500 remained abroad.<sup>86</sup>

**Table 2/5: Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2017<sup>87</sup>**

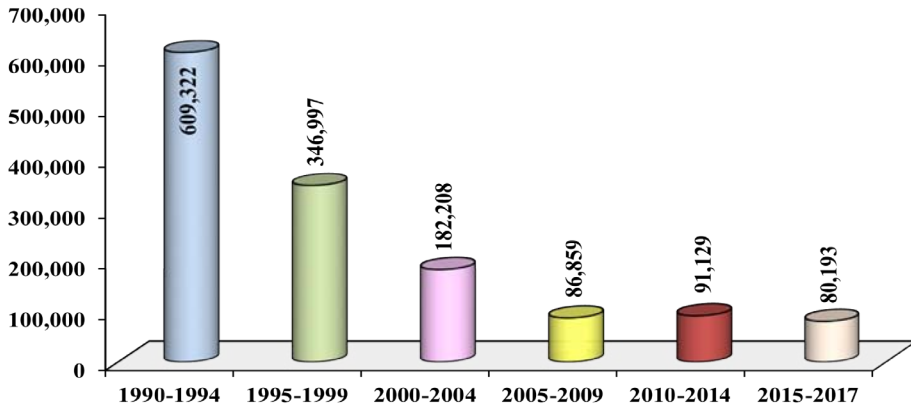
Year	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014
<b>No. of immigrants</b>	609,322	346,997	182,208	86,859	91,129

Year	2015	2016	2017	Total
<b>No. of immigrants</b>	27,908	25,977	26,308	<b>1,396,708</b>

The following chart shows the evolution of the number of Jewish immigrants to Israel for every five years during 1990–2014, excluding the 2015–2017 period.

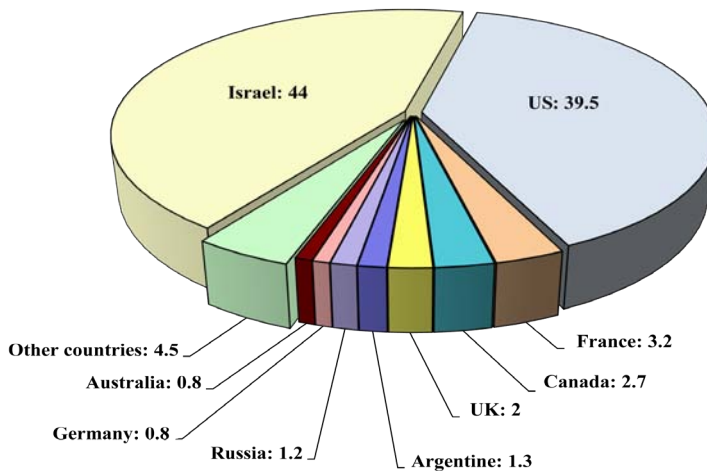
### Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2017



As for the world Jewish population, Sergio DellaPergola, the renowned demographer and statistician, indicated that it was estimated to be 14.411 million at the end of 2016, an increase of 198 thousand from 2015 (a 1.4% increase), according to the latest statistics until the writing of this report (see table 3/5). In the same context, there remain warnings against the “dissolving” of the followers of Judaism outside of Israel because of the high proportion of mixed marriages, which has an impact on the world Jewish population, especially in Western countries.

**Table 3/5: World Jewish Population by Country 2016<sup>88</sup>**

Country	Estimates (thousands)	Percentage (%)
Israel	6,336.4	44
US	5,700	39.5
France	460	3.2
Canada	388	2.7
United Kingdom (UK)	290	2
Argentina	180.7	1.3
Russia	179.5	1.2
Germany	117	0.8
Australia	113	0.8
Others	646.1	4.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,410.7</b>	<b>100</b>

**World Jewish Population by Country 2016 (%)**

As noted above, Israeli statistics incorporate the Palestinians of East Jerusalem and the Syrians of the Golan Heights with the Palestinians of 1948; therefore, this observation should be taken into account when discussing the religious distribution and social conditions of these citizens. Accordingly, based on the data at the end of 2015, there are about 1.489 million Muslims (Sunnis), 84.7%, 137 thousand Druze, 7.8%, and 130 thousand Christians, 7.4%.<sup>89</sup> In terms of population growth rates in 2015 and 2016, it reached 2.2% among Arabs compared to 1.8% among Jews.<sup>90</sup>

According to a report issued by the Israel National Insurance Institute in December 2017, half of the Arab families in Israel are still living below the poverty line, despite some improvement, from 53.3% in 2015 to 49.4% in 2016. The report found that the proportion of working families living below the poverty line is rising, as both parents worked in 58.6% of poor families in 2016, compared to 55.6% in 2015. It was estimated that the high rate of poverty among working families is due to their low salaries. The percentage of single parent families threatened by poverty rose from 21.7% in 2015 to 26.1% in 2016. According to the report, the poverty rate in Israel in 2016 was the highest among all the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>91</sup>

Life expectancy among Arabs was 76.9 years for males and 81.1 for females in 2015. In contrast, the average life expectancy in the same year among Jews was 80.9 years for males and 84.5 years for females.<sup>92</sup>

### *Third: Economic Indicators*

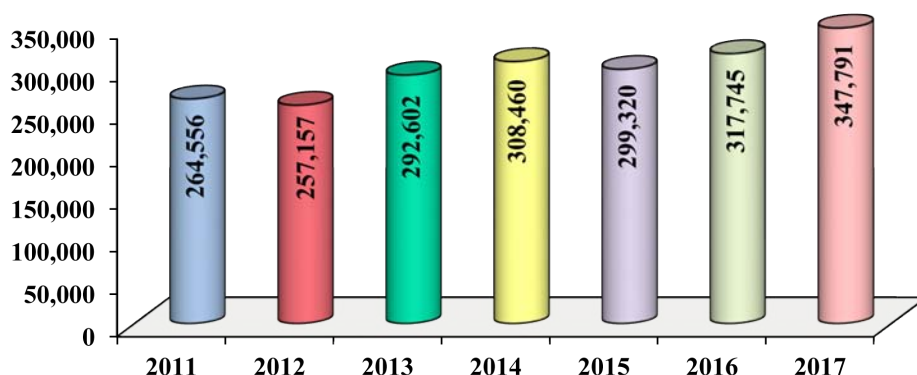
The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Israel in 2016 was 1,220.3 billion shekels (\$318 billion) compared to 1,162.5 billion shekels (\$299 billion) in 2015, reflecting growth of 5%. In 2017, Israel's GDP, according to data available from the first three quarters of the year, was estimated at 1,251.9 billion shekels (\$348 billion) marking growth of 2.6%. When calculating the growth rate in dollars, and because of the volatility of the value of the shekel against the dollar, we find that the growth rate increased 9.5% in 2017 and by 6.2% in 2016 compared to the previous year (see table 4/5). It is worth noting that these results are contrary to the growth expectations of the Bank of Israel, which were 2.4% in 2015,<sup>93</sup> 3.5% in 2016,<sup>94</sup> and 3.1% in 2017.<sup>95</sup> The statistics presented here are drawn from official sources, which update their data and make amendments to it from time to time.

**Table 4/5: Israeli GDP 2011–2017 at Current Prices<sup>96</sup>**

Year	GDP (million shekels)	GDP (\$ million)	Shekel exchange rate (according to Bank of Israel)
2011	936,134	264,556	3.5791
2012	992,110	257,157	3.858
2013	1,056,119	292,602	3.6094
2014	1,103,485	308,460	3.5774
2015	1,162,530	299,320	3.8839
2016	1,220,331	317,745	3.8406
2017*	1,251,944	347,791	3.5997

\* Estimated numbers are based on the figures of Q<sub>1</sub>, Q<sub>2</sub> and Q<sub>3</sub> of 2017.

**Israeli GDP 2011–2017 at Current Prices (\$ million)**



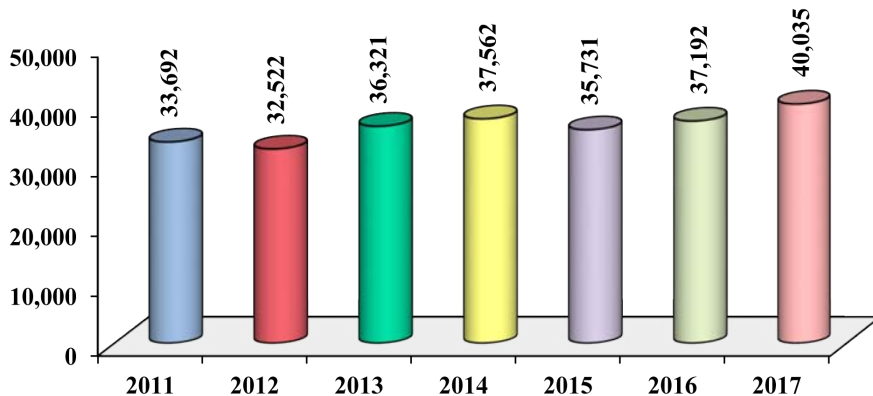
The Israeli GDP per capita in 2016 totaled 142,839 (\$37,192), compared to 138,775 shekels (\$35,731) in 2015, a 2.9% increase. As for 2017, Israeli GDP per capita, according to available statistics for the first three quarters of 2017, was estimated at 144,113 shekels (\$40,035), a 0.9% increase. When calculating the growth rate in dollars, and because of the volatility of the value of the shekel against the dollar, we find that the growth rate increased 7.6% in 2017 and by 4.1% in 2016 compared to the previous year. Therefore, one should not rush to make inaccurate conclusions if the difference in local currency against the dollar is not taken into account (see table 5/5).

**Table 5/5: Israeli GDP per Capita 2011–2017 at Current Prices<sup>97</sup>**

Year	GDP per capita (shekels)	GDP per capita (\$)
2011	120,588	33,692
2012	125,469	32,522
2013	131,097	36,321
2014	134,373	37,562
2015	138,775	35,731
2016	142,839	37,192
2017*	144,113	40,035

\* Estimated numbers are based on the figures of Q<sub>1</sub>, Q<sub>2</sub> and Q<sub>3</sub> of 2017.

**Israeli GDP per Capita 2011–2017 at Current Prices (\$)**



With regard to the budget of the Israeli government, CBS indicated that the grand total in the approved 2017 budget of government payments amounted to 514.068 billion shekels (\$142.8 billion), compared with 504.199 billion shekels

(\$131.3 billion) of the adjusted budget of 2016. However, the grand total of the budget performance of government payments was 470.784 billion shekels (\$122.6 billion) in 2016 compared to 427.366 billion shekels (\$110 billion) in 2015.<sup>98</sup>

The budget is divided into three axes, the first of which is the ordinary budget, which includes the expenses of the presidency, the prime minister and the ministries. The second includes the development budget and debt repayment, and the third includes the budget of business enterprises. We note that the ordinary budget performance of 2016 was 333.612 billion shekels (about \$86.9 billion), including that of the Ministry of Defense (76.912 billion shekels, about \$20 billion), and Ministry of Public Security (15.522 billion shekels, about \$4 billion). This was in addition to 62.816 billion shekels (about \$16.4 billion) spent by the Ministry of Education, and 46.606 billion shekels (about \$12.1 billion) spent by the Ministry of Social Affairs. We also note that debt repayment has carved out a significant portion of the total expenditure, reaching 88.124 billion shekels (about \$22.9 billion) in 2016 compared to 66.686 billion shekels (\$17.2 billion) in 2015.<sup>99</sup>

The grand total of budget performance of government receipts in 2016 were 447.258 billion shekels (about \$116.5 billion) compared with 404.679 billion shekels (about \$104.2 billion) in 2015. A large proportion of the current receipts come from income tax (120.5 billion shekels or about \$31.4 billion) and value added tax (VAT) (91.3 billion shekels, or \$23.8 billion).<sup>100</sup>

According to CBS, the grand total of budget performance of government receipts in 2017 amounted to 469.15 billion shekels (about \$130.3 billion), compared with 445.08 billion shekels (about \$115.9 billion) in the 2016 adjusted budget.<sup>101</sup>

It appears that the statistics obtained from the Israeli Ministry of Finance website focus on the ordinary budget primarily related to the government and its ministries, and the updated budget for 2017 shows total expenditures of 383.891 billion shekels (about \$106.6 billion), without any reference to debt repayment or business enterprises. Similarly, the updated budget for 2016 shows total expenditure of 371.963 billion shekels (about \$96.9 billion).<sup>102</sup>

Some inconsistency and confusion could happen to some researchers, for the statistics and figures issued by different Israeli official bodies did not specify if

the intended budget was the grand total budget or the ordinary budget. It did not specify if it was the budget approved by the government or by the Knesset, and whether it is the updated budget for receipts and payments after the completion of the fiscal year.

The following table shows the receipts and payments of the Israeli government in 2015–2017:

**Table 6/5: Budget Performance of Israeli Government Receipts and Payments 2015–2017<sup>103</sup>**

		2015		2016		2017	
		Million shekel	Million \$	Million shekel	Million \$	Million shekel	Million \$
<b>Receipts</b>	Current Receipts	274,750	70,741	287,804	74,937	302,000	83,896
	Capital Receipts	109,985	28,318	139,101	36,219	144,817	40,230
	Business enterprises	19,944	5,135	20,353	5,299	22,333	6,204
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>404,679</b>	<b>104,194</b>	<b>447,258</b>	<b>116,455</b>	<b>469,150</b>	<b>130,330</b>
<b>Payments</b>	Ordinary budget	314,525	80,982	333,615	86,865	353,681	98,253
	Development budget and debt repayment	92,897	23,918	116,816	30,416	138,054	38,352
	Business enterprises	19,944	5,135	20,353	5,299	22,333	6,204
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>427,366</b>	<b>110,035</b>	<b>470,784</b>	<b>122,580</b>	<b>514,068</b>	<b>142,809</b>
<b>Deficit (%)</b>		<b>–5.6</b>		<b>–5.3</b>		<b>–9.6</b>	

Note: The numbers of 2015 and 2016 are the actual receipts and payments, while for 2017, they are of the approved budget.

Israeli exports for 2017 amounted to \$61.087 billion, compared with \$60.573 billion in 2016 and \$64.063 billion in 2015. Thus, exports increased by 0.8% in 2017 after falling by –5.4% in 2016. As for imports in 2017, they reached a total of \$69.143 billion, compared to \$65.805 billion in 2016 and \$62.071 billion

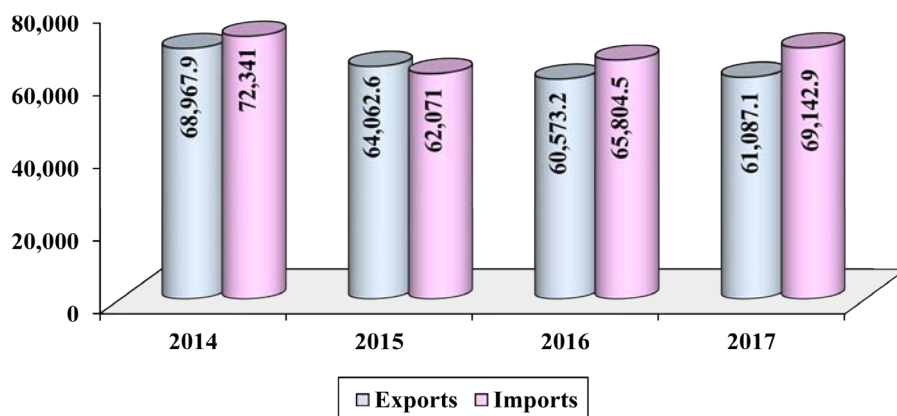
in 2015. Thus, imports increased by 5.1% in 2017, compared with an increase of 6% in 2016 (see table 7/5). It must be noted that these statistics do not include foreign trade services (import and export activities).

When exports and imports are calculated in shekels, there will be a difference in the data. The value of exports will decrease by –5.5% in 2017 and by –6.6% in 2016. Imports will decrease by –1.6% in 2017, after it had increased by 4.7% in 2016.

**Table 7/5: Total Israeli Exports and Imports in 2014–2017  
at Current Prices<sup>104</sup>**

		Exports	Imports	Surplus/ deficit (%)
2014	Million shekels	246,481.4	258,586.3	–4.9
	\$ million	68,967.9	72,341	
2015	Million shekels	249,091.7	241,235.2	+3.2
	\$ million	64,062.6	62,071	
2016	Million shekels	232,757.6	252,668.3	–8.6
	\$ million	60,573.2	65,804.5	
2017	Million shekels	219,995.3	248,632.3	–13
	\$ million	61,087.1	69,142.9	

**Total Israeli Exports and Imports 2014–2017 at Current Prices (\$ million)**



The US still maintains its status as a primary trading partner of Israel. In 2017, Israeli exports to US amounted to \$17.084 billion, representing 28% of total Israeli exports, compared to \$17.589 billion in 2016 (29% of the total Israeli exports). Israeli imports from the US reached \$8.085 billion in 2017 (11.7% of total Israeli imports), compared to \$8.076 billion in 2016 (12.3% of total Israeli imports). Israel offsets its trade deficit to a large extent with most of its trading partners through the trade surplus with the US, which was \$9 billion in 2017 and \$9.5 billion in 2016, representing a great support to the Israeli economy (see table 8/5).

China ranked the second largest trading partner of Israel, with exports to China reaching \$3.29 billion in 2017 and \$3.33 billion in 2016, and Israeli imports from China reaching \$6.528 billion in 2017 and \$5.896 billion in 2016. Britain ranked third in terms of trade volume with Israel, which amounted to \$9.47 billion in 2017, compared to \$7.577 billion in 2016.

Switzerland advanced from the sixth to the fourth place in 2017, with trade volume reaching \$6.984 billion, up from \$5.755 billion in 2016. Belgium dropped from fourth place in 2016 to fifth place with a trade volume of about \$6.8 billion in 2017, after it was \$6.421 billion in 2016. Hong Kong dropped from third place in 2015 to fifth place in 2016 with a trade volume of \$6.413 billion, and then to the seventh position in 2017 with \$6.127 billion (see table 8/5).

In addition to the previous countries, the major countries that received exports from Israel in 2017 are the Netherlands (\$2.287 billion), India (\$1.933 billion), France (\$1.765 billion), Germany (\$1.643 billion), Turkey, Italy, Brazil, and South Korea. Israel's imports in 2017 were mainly from the following countries: Germany (\$4.722 billion), the Netherlands (\$2.926 billion), Turkey (\$2.896 billion), Italy (\$2.778 billion), Japan (\$2.082 billion) and India (see table 8/5).

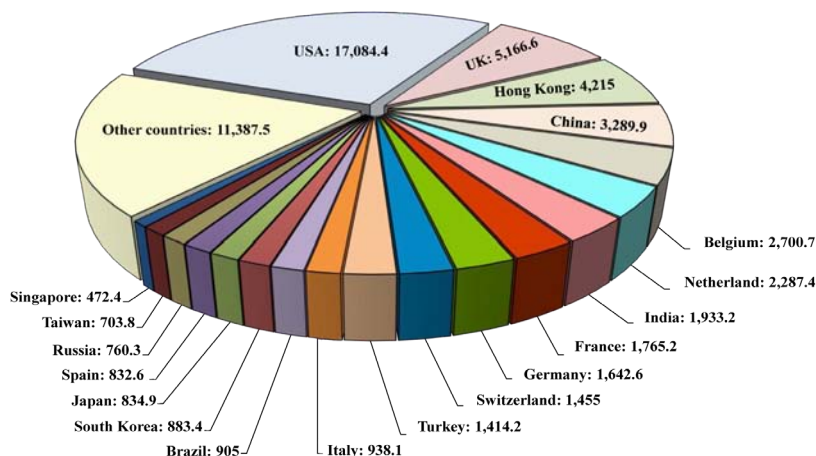
In 2016, major countries that received exports from Israel were India (\$2.4 billion), the Netherlands (\$2.14 billion), Germany (\$1.52 billion), France (\$1.45 billion), Turkey, Italy, Spain and Japan. Israel's imports in 2016 were mainly from the following countries: Germany (\$4.07 billion), the Netherlands (\$2.7 billion), Italy (\$2.69 billion), Turkey (\$2.6 billion), Japan (\$2.35 billion), India (\$1.77 billion) (see table 8/5).

**Table 8/5: Volume of Israeli Trade, Exports and Imports to/ from Selected Countries 2016–2017 at Current Prices (\$ million)<sup>105</sup>**

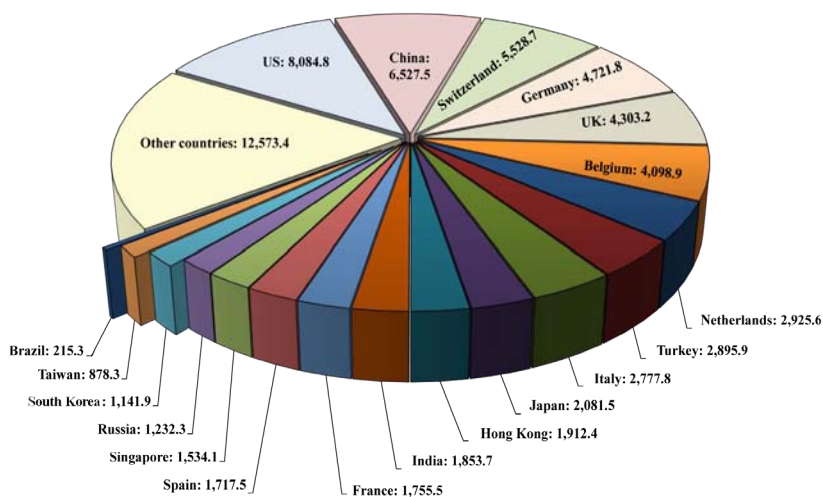
	Countries	Trade volume		Israeli Exports to:		Israeli Imports from:	
		2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016
1	US	25,169.2	25,665.3	17,084.4	17,589	8,084.8	8,076.3
2	China	9,817.4	9,224	3,289.9	3,327.8	6,527.5	5,896.2
3	UK	9,469.8	7,577	5,166.6	3,909.1	4,303.2	3,667.9
4	Switzerland	6,983.7	5,754.5	1,455	1,466.4	5,528.7	4,288.1
5	Belgium	6,799.6	6,421.2	2,700.7	2,507.3	4,098.9	3,913.9
6	Germany	6,364.4	5,589.5	1,642.6	1,519.9	4,721.8	4,069.6
7	Hong Kong	6,127.4	6,412.9	4,215	4,435.5	1,912.4	1,977.4
8	Netherlands	5,213	4,840.4	2,287.4	2,139.6	2,925.6	2,700.8
9	Turkey	4,310.1	3,899.4	1,414.2	1,297.7	2,895.9	2,601.7
10	India	3,786.9	4,168.2	1,933.2	2,399.5	1,853.7	1,768.7
11	Italy	3,715.9	3,652	938.1	958.3	2,777.8	2,693.7
12	France	3,520.7	3,138.3	1,765.2	1,448	1,755.5	1,690.3
13	Japan	2,916.4	3,113.4	834.9	759.2	2,081.5	2,354.2
14	Spain	2,550.1	2,473.4	832.6	896.1	1,717.5	1,577.3
15	South Korea	2,025.3	1,896.3	883.4	580	1,141.9	1,316.3
16	Singapore	2,006.5	1,969.8	472.4	450.6	1,534.1	1,519.2
17	Russia	1,992.6	1,559.2	760.3	620.3	1,232.3	938.9
18	Taiwan	1,582.1	1,480.4	703.8	696	878.3	784.4
19	Brazil	1,120.3	1,000.8	905	747.3	215.3	253.5
20	Other countries	23,960.9	25,314.1	11,387.5	11,931.2	12,573.4	13,382.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>130,230</b>	<b>126,377.7</b>	<b>61,087.1</b>	<b>60,573.2</b>	<b>69,142.9</b>	<b>65,804.5</b>



### Israeli Exports to Selected Countries 2017 at Current Prices (\$ million)



### Israeli Imports from Selected Countries 2017 at Current Prices (\$ million)



Manufacturing, mining and quarrying topped the list of Israeli exports for 2016 and 2017, amounting to 83.8% and 85.3% respectively. Net Israeli diamond exports reached 14.2% in 2016 and 12.7% in 2017. Agricultural exports and those relating to forestry and fishing totaled to 2.2% in 2016 and 2017 (see table 9/5). The breakdown of industrial exports by technological intensity shows that high-technology industries accounted for 47% of total industrial exports (excluding diamonds) in 2017, while medium-tech industries accounted for 45% and low-tech industries for 7%.<sup>106</sup>

**Table 9/5: Israeli Exports by Commodity Group 2015–2017 (\$ million)<sup>107</sup>**

Year	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Manufacturing, mining & quarrying excl. working diamonds	Diamonds		Others	Returned exports	Total
			Working of diamonds	Wholesale of diamonds			
2015	1,168.1	45,283.6	4,997.4	2,200.6	0.5	–116.2	<b>53,534</b>
2016	1,150.5	43,758.4	4,703.1	2,704.4	3.9	–132	<b>52,188.3</b>
2017	1,187.8	45,194.5	4,493	2,232.6	10.5	–118.5	<b>52,999.9</b>

In terms of Israeli imports, raw materials topped the list in 2016 and 2017, reaching 41.6% and 41.7%, respectively. Fuel imports accounted for 9% and 11.2%, import of consumer goods 20.5% and 20.1%, investment goods 18% and 17.8%, while diamonds 10% and 8.5% in 2016 and 2017 respectively (see table 10/5).

It should be noted that Israeli fuel imports in 2014 were \$12.8 billion, and fell to \$5.8 billion in 2016, a decrease of –54.7%,<sup>108</sup> due to the Israeli investments in gas extraction in eastern Mediterranean basin where production began in the Tamar field in 2013 in quantities that will suffice Israel for the coming 15–20 years.

**Table 10/5: Israeli Imports by Commodity Group 2015–2017 (\$ million)<sup>109</sup>**

Year	Consumer goods	Raw materials	Investment goods	Fuels	Diamond rough and polished	Others	Total
2015	11,868.7	26,882.1	8,626.6	7,406.5	6,284.1	269.3	<b>61,337.3</b>
2016	13,334.8	27,076	11,679.4	5,843.1	6,532.2	599.2	<b>65,064.7</b>
2017	13,664.4	28,335.9	12,086.6	7,602.4	5,754.7	562.3	<b>68,006.3</b>

Although Israel is a rich and developed country, it still receives US aid annually. In 2017, it received a total of \$3.108 billion, including \$3.1 billion in military grants, compared to \$3.11 billion in 2016. Moreover, the US military grant has been stable since 2013 at \$3.1 billion. Thus, Israel has received US support between 1949 and 2017 of \$130.687 billion, according to the final report of Congressional Research Services (CRS).<sup>110</sup> In the second term of President Barack Obama, a US agreement was signed to support Israel with \$38 billion over 10 years, i.e., an average of \$3.8 billion annually covering the 2019–2028 period.<sup>111</sup>

**Table 11/5: US Bilateral Aid to Israel 1949–2016 (\$ million)<sup>112</sup>**

Period	1949–1958	1959–1968	1969–1978	1979–1988	1989–1998	1999–2008
<b>Total</b>	599.6	727.8	11,426.5	29,933.9	31,551.9	29,374.7

Period	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
<b>Total</b>	2,583.9	2,803.8	3,029.2	3,098	3,115	3,115	3,110	3,110	3,107.5	<b>130,686.8</b>

### ***Fourth: Military Indicators***

Anticipation prevailing the Israeli military establishment continued in 2016 and 2017, due to the continuous developments in the Palestine situation, the volatile circumstances in the region, especially on the northern front, which includes Syria and Lebanon, and on the southern border of Israel, adjacent to GS and Sinai. These conditions and political and military variables prompted Tel Aviv to carry out ongoing assessments that had an impact on the military establishment and its role in the current and future stage. Consequently, a series of appointments to key army positions took place, and army plans and military and security strategy, as well as the modernization of its military arsenal were affected.

#### **1. Appointments and Structural Changes**

In 2016 and 2017, several new appointments and promotions in the Israeli military took place, including many corps and command posts, except for the position of ground forces commander, which the head of Central Command, Major General (Maj. Gen.) Roni Numa, and the head of the Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, rejected. This rejection was due to the extent of the challenges that come with this position, namely in the strategy of the coming wars, especially after the failures of the 2014 GS war. In addition, both generals wish to become deputy Chief of Staff in the Israeli army.<sup>113</sup>

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman decided on 3/11/2016, to appoint the head of the Northern Command, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, as Deputy Chief of Staff. This position represented a transition before competing for the position of Chief of Staff. Kochavi replaced Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan in this post. The Home Front Command leader, Maj. Gen. Yoel Strick, succeeded Kochavi at the

head of the Northern Front. The Commander of the Planning Division, Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin, was appointed Commander of the Israeli Air Force as a successor to Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel<sup>114</sup>; Norkin received his duties on 10/8/2017.<sup>115</sup>

Two army generals were promoted to the rank of major general: Amir Abulafia, commander of the 162nd Division, who was appointed as head of the Planning Directorate, and Tamir Yadai, who was appointed as the commander of the Home Front Command. Brigadier General Moni Katz was promoted to the rank of Maj. Gen. to take over the Depth Corps and replace General Tal Russo.<sup>116</sup> On 13/7/2016, Col. Ofer Vinter was appointed leader of the Central Command, which includes the West Bank. A religious right-wing extremist, Vinter was the Givati Brigade commander during the Gaza offensive in 2014.<sup>117</sup>

In July 2016, Rabbi Eyal Karim was appointed Chief Rabbi of the Israeli army, despite his racist and extremist statements, such as the fatwa he issued, allowing soldiers to “rape non-Jewish women of the enemy.”<sup>118</sup>

In an expected move and as a result of the good relationship between the Israeli Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot and the highest political echelon, Lieberman announced on 18/1/2017, the extension of Eisenkot’s mandate for another year to a term of four years.<sup>119</sup> On 13/11/2017, Lieberman also approved new appointments to the army leadership based on the recommendations of Eisenkot. Tamir Heiman was appointed Military Intelligence Chief instead of Herzl “Herzi” Halevi, who became leader of the Southern Command. David Shapira was appointed as Commander of the Binyamin Brigade. Maj. Gen. Lior Carmeli was appointed head of the Cyber Communications and Defense Directorate instead of Maj. Gen. Nadav Padan, who was appointed to the Central Command. Brigadier General Itzik Turgeman was appointed head of Technology and Logistics Directorate, instead of Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, who replaced Maj. Gen. Nitzan Alon as head of the Operations Directorate.<sup>120</sup>

## 2. Manpower

The Israeli army has approximately 168 thousand soldiers, and the reserve forces number around 550 thousand,<sup>121</sup> which are highly ready and can be fully mobilized and effectively enter service within four days. There has been no significant change in the size of the Israeli army for many years.

On 8/1/2017, the Israeli army Manpower Directorate published its annual data on the number of soldiers killed during the previous year. In 2016, 41 Israeli soldiers were killed compared with 36 killed in 2015, representing a significant increase. Of the 41, 15 died at their own hands, the same number of soldiers killed themselves in 2014, all were men.<sup>122</sup>

On 12/9/2017, the Israeli High Court of Justice “struck down Knesset legislation from 2015 that was meant to delay efforts to increase the rate at which ultra-Orthodox youth are drafted into the military.” The ruling set a one-year deadline to implement a different framework for handling the ultra-Orthodox draft.<sup>123</sup>

### **3. Military Plans and Directions**

The 16th and 17th Herzliya Conferences held in June 2016 and June 2017 respectively, reflected the security and military challenges facing Israel in light of the political and military changes in the regional environment, especially those adjacent to its northern borders. Although the Israeli security and military leaders, who spoke at the two conferences, emphasized Israel’s continued military superiority in the Middle East, they noted that the “enemy” now enjoys an improved strategic military position. Iran has established its military presence in Syria as a regional neighbor, Hizbullah increased its missile arsenal, in addition to the combat experience it gained in Syria, and Hamas continues to dig tunnels and develop its missile and combat capabilities. This is while taking into account the looming formation of an alliance comprising Russia, Iran, Hizbullah and the Syrian regime.<sup>124</sup>

This complex and unstable strategic situation for Israel led to the development of a high-level security, military and political strategy to address these challenges. It should be noted that some of the threatening messages of the Israeli leaders during the two conferences may well be part of the psychological war and are not necessarily within the framework of a strategy that is prepared for implementation.

The Israeli strategy, as it emanated from Herzliya, focuses on maintaining the state of deterrence on all fronts, as well as the process of “burning into the consciousness,” of the enemy, by hinting that in case of a new war, full destruction of infrastructure would take place whether in Lebanon or in GS, while maintaining calm on all other fronts. The Director General of the Ministry of Intelligence Services, Haggai Zuriel, acknowledged during his speech at the 17th Herzliya Conference that Israel is unable to face external threats alone; therefore, it needs

the support of major international and regional powers, including cooperation with “moderate” Arab countries.<sup>125</sup>

The annual Strategic Survey of Israel 2016–2017 issued by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) on 3/1/2017, focused on continuing the strategy of maintaining deterrence and preventing the transfer of advanced weapons from Iran through Syria to Hizbullah, as well as mitigating the risk of escalation. At the same time, it recommended that Israel must also continue gathering intelligence on Hizbullah’s forces in order to facilitate a preemptive strike and/ or neutralization of the organization’s high-quality apparatuses shortly after a conflict breaks out. The survey exhorted the Israeli army’s special forces must practice street warfare, while using the clothes and weapons used by Hizbullah and the Palestinian factions.<sup>126</sup>

The survey also highlighted the attacks of Palestinian individuals against the army and settlers in WB, in addition to Hamas’ attempt to rebuild its infrastructure to launch attacks against Israeli targets.<sup>127</sup>

This high-risk strategic situation in Israel due to the developments in its environment was also reflected in the heated debates and deliberations between and within political and military institutions in Israel about the ability of the Israeli army to fight a future war in the wake of its failures in recent years. Such failures became clearer during the Or HaDagan exercise, which began on 3/9/2017 and lasted 10 days, especially with regard to the military equipment used by the army in the ground war, as well as the lack of coordination between the political and military levels to implement the army’s plan.

According to an Israeli security report published on 27/9/2017, Israeli security concern focuses on four levels: First, Hamas continues to build more underground bunkers and tunnels in GS for defensive purposes rather than for creating tunnels that cross into Israel for the purposes of attack, especially that no tunnel will be able to cross Israel’s new underground barrier, which has a system of advanced sensor and monitoring devices to detect tunnels and is combined with a six-meter, above-ground fence. In addition, Hamas has developed missile and combat capabilities. Second, the report estimates that Hizbullah has dozens of missiles with 500 km-range, several hundred with a range of 300 km, and tens of thousands of missiles with a range of up to 40 km. The report pointed out that Hizbullah is making extensive effort to help Iran develop its accuracy and is trying to build factories in Syria and Lebanon for this purpose.<sup>128</sup>

According to the report, the third level is the consolidation of Iran's influence in Syria, where it has military bases. There is a danger of Iran developing its missile capabilities, which have become more precise and increasingly deadly. In addition, the threat of the Iran-backed militias in Syria has emerged, and their participation in the next war with Israel has become a foregone conclusion. The fourth level is the war on ISIS and the danger of its concentrated power in Sinai after its defeat in Syria and Iraq, as well as its readiness to launch military operations against the Israeli army instead of the Egyptian army if it succeeds in establishing its control in the Sinai.<sup>129</sup>

There is no doubt that these military transformations on all fronts of potential combat with Israel prompted decision-makers in Tel Aviv to draw plans and make the necessary preparations. On the Southern front, the Israeli army erected a fence along the border with GS, six meters above the ground, with a concrete wall tens of meters underground.<sup>130</sup> Israeli writer Yossi Melman stated that the construction of the wall was a complex technological and engineering process involving European experts and materials, at a cost of three billion shekels (about \$833.3 million).<sup>131</sup>

With regard to the Northern front with Lebanon and Syria, the Israeli army established a new equation, which seems to have been built in part through silence or agreement and coordination with the Russian side. This equation allows for Israeli military intervention through specific operations aimed at military bases or weapons stores belonging to Iran and Hizbullah in Syria that pose a threat to Israel. The equation also prevents the establishment of a Shiite passage from Iran to Damascus, according to Lieberman, who stressed that Israel "will not allow anyone to violate the red lines."<sup>132</sup>

Despite Israel's verbal escalation and its desire to show a positive image of the army's preparedness for the next war, the report of the Knesset Subcommittee on Security Perception and Strength Building, which was partially published on 25/9/2017, presents a different picture of the state of preparedness for the next war. Indeed, severe deficiencies were highlighted in the report regarding the political echelons' functioning, about which it was said they were giving the Israeli army improper instruction. It found shortcomings in the rate of forming certain essential capabilities in the army. This failing, the report documents, was the result of the political ranks not fulfilling its role of setting policy to then be implemented by the army.<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, the same report accused the government of failing to adapt the army's requirements with the changes in the capabilities of its adversaries and their military position, especially Hizbullah. It stated that the Israeli army plays chess with itself, where it determines its own security needs and threats and how to prepare for them. However, when it is time for real military confrontations, as shown during recent confrontations, the political leadership takes strategic decisions that differ from those the army prefers. Nonetheless, the government does not intervene and then it distances itself from the repercussions of any anticipated failure in the next war or confrontation, which the report considered an important gap in the strategy of the state.<sup>134</sup>

It can be deduced from the report that the multi-year plan known as the Gideon Plan, which began in 2015 and ends in 2020, and which is supposed to equip the Israeli army for the next war, is also an acknowledgment that the army did not prepare properly previously. This was reflected in the 2014 GS war, so the army considers that it must prepare differently. However, Gideon's plan did not take into account the developments on the Northern front, which united the Syrian and Lebanese fronts in any future war, according to Israelis. Thus, the Israeli army could be forced to act with all its might on several fronts in parallel.<sup>135</sup>

Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council (NSC), said in an interview with the Hebrew television that Israel would be unable to withstand a new war against Hizbullah, and called for avoiding confrontation or any of its triggers.<sup>136</sup>

#### **4. Military Maneuvers**

With the increasing security and military threats on the border with Israel, and in light of regional transformations, in 2016 and 2017 the Israeli army launched a series of military exercises that included most of its weapons types (land, air and sea) in addition to the Cyber Warfare Unit. These exercises included most fronts: internal, southern, northern, maritime and air, as well as exercises with other armies outside the border. The comprehensive approach is part of the strategic transformation decided by Israeli army staff, to keep pace with regional developments since 2014.

On the Southern front with GS, Israel realized that the resistance factions there had recovered after the 2014 war. They accumulated their military achievements,



expertise, and growing military capabilities, especially with regard to missiles, and the network of sophisticated and growing offensive tunnels. During 2016 and 2017, the Israeli army launched several military drills on that front, simulating rocket attacks on the GS envelope settlements and beyond, and simulating infiltrations through tunnels or the sea into Israeli settlements or military locations close to northern GS. The development of Israeli military tactics coincided with a similar development among the resistance factions, especially the Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades. This was confirmed by an officer in the Northern Front Command, who said on 14/4/2016 that Hamas was a very clever enemy that had surprised him, and was a quick learner.<sup>137</sup> On 28/2/2016, the army initiated a major military exercise, including maneuvers simulating scenarios of a new confrontation, after there were talks for a while about the GS tunnels.<sup>138</sup> After that, a subterranean obstacle near the border was constructed to thwart Hamas attack tunnels.<sup>139</sup>

The Israeli military drills did not only defend against a military offensive by the resistance, but also included a simulation of an Israeli military occupation of GS to “surprise the enemy.”<sup>140</sup> A one-week exercise conducted by the Israeli army in March 2017 saw the participation of the 401st Brigade and the Nahal Brigade, which spreads along the Gaza border with the Givati Brigade.<sup>141</sup> The army also conducted exercises in WB to maintain “the readiness and preparedness of Israeli forces” in the face of future developments there.<sup>142</sup>

The Israeli leadership also focused on developments on the southern borders with Egypt, especially in light of the growing threats of armed groups there, especially ISIS. The Israeli army conducted several military maneuvers along the border with Egypt, to prepare to face any potential cross-border operations from the Sinai Province.<sup>143</sup>

In this context, the Israeli Navy carried out two rounds of exercises and naval maneuvers in the Red Sea on 31/3/2016 and 21/11/2016. The first was a simulation of an attack and hijacking of a military warship by ISIS,<sup>144</sup> and the second was the simulation of an attack by ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula against Israeli tourist targets in the Gulf of Eilat.<sup>145</sup>

As far as the Northern Front was concerned, Israeli decision-makers believed that the axis that includes Iran, Hizbullah and the Syrian regime, which has close ties with Russia, is gradually recovering after securing many military achievements on the ground. This requires the Israeli army to prepare for these military

transformations, through the qualitative, tactical and strategic development of maneuvers. The momentum of these maneuvers has increased over time, as if in parallel with the field development on the Northern Front.

The Israeli military maneuvers in 2016–2017 took into consideration the assumption that any future war on the Northern Front will necessarily include Syria and Lebanon. The Israeli army assumed that the next war on the Northern Front might witness two major developments: (a) the carrying out of offensive operations by Hizbullah against the settlements of northern occupied Palestine, and (b) missile attacks that may be carried out by Hizbullah and the Syrian army on both fronts.

In this context, the Israeli army ended two weeks of military maneuvers on the Northern Front on 20/1/2016, simulating the war on the Syrian and Lebanese fronts, with the participation of the air and naval forces in the first training of its kind.<sup>146</sup> On 20/4/2016, the Israeli army concluded a four-day wide-scale surprise military exercise in the occupied Syrian Golan, with simulated clashes on the Syrian front with rockets fired from the liberated part of the Golan on the occupied part.<sup>147</sup>

On 18/9/2016, the Israeli army organized defensive exercises to prepare civilians for a full-scale war, which could translate into 1,500 rockets a day.<sup>148</sup> The Israeli navy also carried out maneuvers simulating a maritime war against Hizbullah as part of an Israeli intelligence scenario. It is estimated that the next confrontation will include the imposition by Hizbullah of a naval blockade on Israel by attacking commercial ships from and to Israeli ports and hitting gas fields.<sup>149</sup>

The large-scale Or HaDagan 10-day exercise conducted by the Israeli army on the Northern Front with Lebanon was a milestone in the history of Israeli maneuvers. The largest maneuver in 20 years began on 3/9/2017, with the participation of 40 thousand Israeli army soldiers from all sectors (land, air, and sea). It was divided into two phases: the first simulated the repulsing of an attack by hundreds of Hizbullah fighters and their occupation of Israeli border towns with Lebanon, as well as a large-scale evacuation operation in that area. The second phase simulated the army invading Lebanese villages, attacking Hizbullah strongholds, and waging street combat with Hizbullah fighters.<sup>150</sup>

As for the joint maneuvers between the Israeli army and other armies during 2016–2017, they witnessed some changes in that they involved Israel alongside

Arab and Muslim countries with which it does not have official relations, in addition to conducting maneuvers with the Indian Air Force for the first time. On 15/8/2016, the “Red Flag” advanced combat training exercise took place at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, between air forces from the US, Israel, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>151</sup>

On 27/3/2017, the Israeli Air Force participated for the second time in a joint exercise in Greece, called INIOHOS 2017. According to official reports of the Greek air force, the US, UAE and Italy took part in the exercise.<sup>152</sup>

On 3/3/2016, the end of the eighth biennial exercise was marked. A joint exercise between the US-European Command (USEUCOM) and the Israeli army. The exercise was an eight-day computer-assisted ballistic missile defense exercise designed to improve coordination between the US and Israeli militaries.<sup>153</sup>

In June 2017, a special Israeli commando unit completed a large-scale three-day military drill in Cyprus’s Troodos Mountains, simulating a series of military scenarios in southern Lebanon, Gaza or Syria. The Troodos Mountains were selected because its terrain resembles that of hilly areas in and around Israel.<sup>154</sup>

In an unprecedented move between India and Israel, the Israeli and Indian air forces launched a two-week joint military exercise, Blue Flag 2017, in the Ouvda Air Force Base, on 5/11/2017, in order to simulate extreme combat scenarios and coalition flights as realistically as possible. The exercise hosted air forces from the US, Greece, Poland, Italy, France, India and Germany.<sup>155</sup>

## **5. Arms and Arms Trade**

The Israeli army pursued its interest in manufacturing and developing various interceptor missile systems. On 1/3/2016, the Israeli army announced that it had received the first batch of the David’s Sling aerial defense system from Israel’s Missile Defense Organization at the Defense Ministry, together with the US Missile Defense Agency, capable of intercepting medium-range rockets. David’s Sling was manufactured primarily by Israeli company Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, with the US-based Raytheon Missile Systems as a subcontractor.<sup>156</sup>

The Israeli Military Industries (IMI) Systems also presented its new Red Sky tactical air defense system on 19/2/2017 in front of representatives from 14 states. According to the Globes website, this weapon detected, identified, automatically tracked, and intercepted drones with great success. The short-range system

uses shoulder-carried missiles to intercept airborne targets automatically using autonomous scanning, tracking, and launching capabilities.<sup>157</sup>

On 29/5/2017, Israel tested a rocket propulsion system, which could be used to launch Israel's strategic ground-to-ground or ground-to-air missiles, such as the "Arrow," which is an anti-ballistic missile system, or the "Jericho," which according to foreign reports can support a nuclear payload.<sup>158</sup>

On 1/8/2016, the Israeli army unveiled the first Israeli-made wheeled armored personnel carrier (APC), Eitan, which is considered one of the most advanced and fortified wheeled fighting vehicles. It has an active protection system to intercept Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) and antitank missile threats. It can reach speeds of up to 90 kilometers per hour and ferry infantry soldiers from one battle sector to another while traveling along roads without the need for military trailer services. It can also travel through difficult terrain.<sup>159</sup>

On 8/6/2016, IMI Systems released the details of the Predator Hawk missile, which has a range of 300 km.<sup>160</sup> The 370 mm caliber and 5 meters long rocket can carry a variety of 200 kg warheads.<sup>161</sup>

Rafael Advanced Defense Systems unveiled one of its advanced multipurpose missiles, the Spike-LR II (Gil 2), weighing 12.7 kg, which can penetrate more than 20 cm of armored concrete. The new Gil missiles are equipped with innovative electro-optical homing heads that contain an infrared sensor and an HD color sensor. The new homing heads provide the Gil 2 with smart tracking capability for a variety of targets by utilizing artificial intelligence capabilities. When fired from land, it can strike targets at a range of 5.5 km. When fired from a helicopter, its maximum range is 10 km. By May 2017, the company had sold tens of thousands of Spike missiles to more than 25 armies around the world.<sup>162</sup>

On 9/6/2016, the Israeli army uncovered its plan to deploy fully autonomous military vehicles, the Border Protector Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs), along the Gaza border. Also fitted are four driving cameras and a 360-degree observation camera to help operators identify threats.<sup>163</sup>

The Israeli army began testing the Namer carrier with a 30 mm turret to make it better suited for urban combat, more maneuverable, and it gives the ability to provide firepower to infantry soldiers.<sup>164</sup>

On 5/9/2017, the Israeli Defense Ministry unveiled three new types of drones. Two of them were transport unmanned aerial vehicles, while the third was an attack drone, capable of firing an attached assault rifle. The first was a remote-controlled helicopter. It has one main rotor to keep it aloft and a second rear rotor to steer. The UAV is able to lift nearly 180 kg and has a top speed of 150 kilometers per hour. The second has multiple rotors that get it in the air. It is much smaller and much less powerful, and capable of carrying 90 kg.<sup>165</sup>

In the context of the close military-security relations between the United States and Israel, on 14/9/2016 the two sides officially signed an unprecedented MOU on security assistance. The then-US President Barack Obama said the MOU “constitutes the single largest pledge of military assistance in U.S. history, totaling \$38 billion over 10 years, including \$33 billion in FMF [Foreign Military Financing] funds and an additional \$5 billion in missile defense funding.”<sup>166</sup>

In August 2017, the Israeli Ministry of Defense concluded a deal with the US administration to purchase 17 more F-35 stealth fighters in addition to 33 of the ultra-high-tech jets already ordered in 2016, which would mean Tel Aviv would own 50 aircraft until 2021. Israel has already taken delivery of five of the jets, made by US-based Lockheed Martin and the most expensive in history, beginning in December 2016.<sup>167</sup>

On 29/3/2017, Sibat, the Military Exports Unit of the Israeli Ministry of Defense announced that military exports rose by 14% in 2016 compared to 2015, reaching the value of \$6.5 billion compared with \$5.7 billion in 2015. Israeli defense exports to Europe have been climbing and reached an all-time high in 2016. There was a 70% jump in military exports to African countries. Defense deals in 2016 included upgrading fighter jets and aeronautic systems (about 20% of the deal flow), monitoring and optoelectronics (18%), missile and antiballistic systems (15%), ammunition and weapons stations (13%), radar systems (12%), intelligence and cyber intelligence systems (8%), drones (7%) and more. Exports totaled \$2.6 billion to the Asia-Pacific region where India is a key market; \$1.8 billion to Europe; \$1.3 billion to North America, \$600 million to Latin America and \$275 million to Africa—a 70% jump in exports compared to the year before (\$163 million in 2015). Africa remains a relatively small market for Israel, but it is a growing one in the industry’s eyes.<sup>168</sup>

## 6. Military Budget

On 21/12/2016, the Israeli Knesset gave its final approval to the two-year budget for 2017 and 2018, and the Israeli Ministry of Defense received 70 billion shekels (about \$18.3 billion) annually.<sup>169</sup>

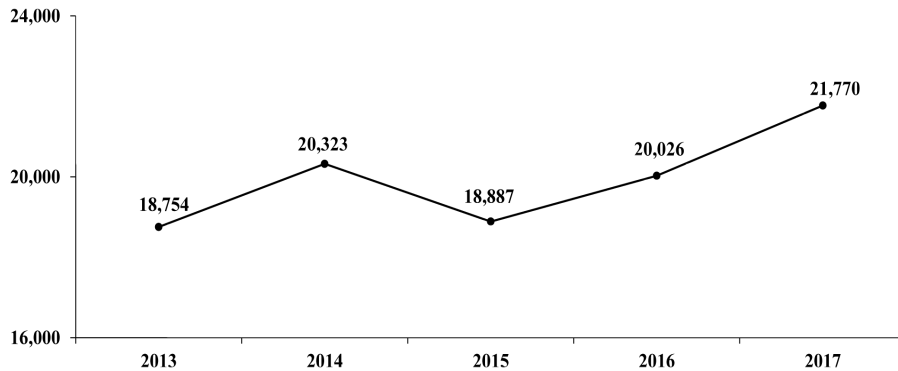
Under the pretext of confronting instability in the region, recent developments in Syria and growing Iranian influence, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman asked Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon to increase the Defense Ministry budget for the coming years. He spoke of the need for an additional 4.5 billion shekels (about \$1.3 billion) per annum.<sup>170</sup> It should also be noted that US support will reach \$3.8 billion annually from 2019 until 2028.<sup>171</sup>

Lieberman believes that the agreement reached by his predecessor did not meet the needs of the army in light of regional developments, continuing instability, and developments in Syria. Thus, Lieberman's request to expand the framework of the army budget was also due to the unsatisfactory performance of the maintenance system in the army and the readiness of a number of ground units for a large war scenario, as a result of the reduction in the allocated and limited budget to these units. In the past, the army has demanded that its budget be increased due to the emergence of urgent strategic changes that require better preparedness. Most of its requests have been approved and budget allocations have been approved by various ministries to meet these demands.<sup>172</sup>

In the following table, CBS provides the actual Israeli military expenditures in 2013–2017:

**Table 12/5: Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2013–2017  
at Current Prices<sup>173</sup>**

Year	Payments (million shekels)	Payments (\$ million)
2013	67,689	18,754
2014	72,705	20,323
2015	73,356	18,887
2016	76,912	20,026
2017	78,367	21,770

**Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2013–2017 at Current Prices (million \$)*****Fifth: The Israeli Position on the Internal Palestinian Situation***

In 2016 and 2017, Israel maintained its policy, or rather its strategy, in dealing with the internal Palestinian situation, considering the continued Palestinian political and geographic division, the faltering reconciliation efforts since 2007, and the absence of any active and influential Arab and Islamic role in the Palestine issue.

With regard to Palestinian reconciliation, Israel did not idly watch the signing of the Hamas and Fatah reconciliation agreement on 12/10/2017 in Cairo,<sup>174</sup> and this was clear in Israeli statements. On 17/10/2017, at a meeting of the security cabinet, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel would not recognize or accept the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, but would neither try to prevent its implementation nor break off relations with the PA.<sup>175</sup> At a meeting with the Likud faction in Ma‘aleh Adumim, on 3/10/2017, and before the signing of the agreement, Netanyahu said, “We cannot accept fake reconciliation on the Palestinian side that comes at the expense of our existence”. He added, “We expect everyone who talks about a peace process to recognize the State of Israel and, of course, the Jewish state.” He demanded also that the PA must insist on Hamas recognizing Israel, dismantling its military wing and breaking off ties with Iran.<sup>176</sup>

Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett called for severing ties with the PA in response to the signing of the reconciliation agreement. “This isn’t about Palestinian

reconciliation but about Mahmoud Abbas joining forces with a murderous terrorist organization,”<sup>177</sup> adding that he intended to ask the security cabinet to immediately stop transferring tax money to the PA.<sup>178</sup> As soon as the actual implementation of the first phase of the reconciliation agreement began, Israel took advantage and tightened the GS siege, bombarding the tunnels and resistance military positions there. Its aim was to achieve two objectives: to impose a new reality and change the rules of combat through a security and military achievement on the ground; and to undermine the reconciliation agreement. On 30/10/2017, the Israeli army destroyed a PIJ tunnel in the east of Khan Yunis, southern of GS, killing 12 militants.<sup>179</sup>

Israel has also kept the GS war option open. The Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, launched a series of threats against GS, Hamas and PIJ after his claims that the latter was preparing a retaliation for the tunnel bombing. Netanyahu claimed, “These days, there are still those who toy with trying renewed attacks on Israel,” Netanyahu said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting. “We will take a very strong hand against anyone who tries to attack us or attacks us from any sector,” adding that Israel sees Hamas as responsible for every attack that emanates from, or is planned against it in, the GS.<sup>180</sup> In February 2017, after a round of mutual bombardments between the Israeli army and the resistance factions in GS, Israeli ministers made a series of threats against GS and Hamas. Minister of Education and the leader of the Jewish Home Party, Bennett, said that a war was “a matter of when, not if.” Adding, “Only with a total victory over our enemy will we put an end to this.”<sup>181</sup>

In GS, Israel maintained its policy of economic strangulation and military pressure in dealing with Hamas. In December 2017, the Israeli army launched several raids on GS, which it said were a response to the continued firing of rockets into Israeli towns.<sup>182</sup> Although the Palestinian National Consensus Government and its security forces effectively took over all GS crossings after signing the reconciliation agreement, Israel deliberately escalated its GS blockade in an effort to thwart reconciliation and maintain economic pressure on Hamas, and to prepare for a new political future in GS that preserves Israeli security interests. According to a report issued by the Gaza Chamber of Commerce and Industry on 31/12/2017, Israel continued during 2017 to follow its policies and punitive measures against GS by adding many products to the list of those prohibited to enter the Strip.

The report stated that Israel is still preventing the entry of many products, raw materials, equipment, machinery, tools and spare parts to GS, while restricting the entry of building materials.<sup>183</sup>

In order to urge the PA to take further measures against the *Intifadah* and put obstacles in the way of the Hamdallah government, the Israeli government has expanded the powers of the Israeli Civil Administration in WB. According to Israeli news website Makor Rishon, the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, followed the carrot-and-stick policy, referring to sanctioning the Palestinian areas from which the attackers originate and rewarding the “quiet” areas by granting permits for travel, work, agriculture, and worship in Jerusalem. In other words, it is a reward for those who do not resist the occupation. Moreover, the Civil Administration grants special travel cards to officials in power and business leaders.<sup>184</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

During 2016–2017, the Israeli society turned to more religious and rightist extremism, while the forces of the traditional left declined. The Israeli political leadership further consolidated Israel’s “Jewish state” identity, implementing Judaization programs, and building more settlements, while increasing restrictions on the people of occupied Palestine in 1948 and 1967. The Israeli government was relatively stable, especially as polls confirmed that in any upcoming elections, the movements represented in the government would win. This was despite the fact that there are some concerns over Netanyahu’s corruption charges.

By the end of 2017, 44% of the Jews in the world live in Israel, but Jewish population growth rates remained modest at 1.8%. The low emigration rates have remained the same for the past 15 years, and the rate of counter-migration almost cancels out the arrival of new immigrants. This has happened while the demographic dilemma has grown with the number of Palestinians in historic Palestine beginning to exceed the number of Jews.

Israel is experiencing a relative economic boom, with GDP per capita rising to about \$40 thousand a year, mirroring Western European countries, with the

advancement of Information Technology (IT), technical and military industries. However, Israel still receives a \$3.1 billion US aid annually.

Israel has one of the most powerful armies in the world, with the best military technologies and weapons of mass destruction. It spends heavily on armament and military industries, making it one of the world's largest arms exporters. Israel felt more secure in the two years covered by the report, especially considering the fragmentation and weakness of the Arab states, the conflicts in the region; and the desire of some regimes to build relations with Israel so the US would be satisfied and to further protect themselves.

Whatever the "honeymoon period" Israel is enjoying, it remains of temporary nature. The strategic environment surrounding Israel is unstable and carries a number of potential risks. The deadlocked peace process, and the collapse of the two-state solution could push wider sectors of Palestinians toward resistance.



## Endnotes

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## This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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Edited By

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Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

# Chapter Seven

## *The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World*



# The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

## *Introduction*

The Muslim world's interaction with the Palestine issue in 2016–2017 did not break with tradition and played out as expected. Despite the preoccupation of Muslim peoples with domestic concerns and despite their far distance, for many of them, from Palestine, the latter—along with Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque—remain what the Muslim nation unite and convene for. These populations are still more interested in, and interactive with, the Palestine issue than their governments, despite the lack of media coverage and mobilization around events on it.

This chapter summarizes the general Muslim world situation concerning this issue, with particular focus on two regional players: Turkey and Iran; countries that are active on Palestine, but with clear differences in their interaction methods.

## *First: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)*

Throughout 2016–2017, the OIC continued to pursue its policy regarding the Palestine issue, with the Jerusalem issue attracting more of its attention due to the increased Israeli targeting of the city in general and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in particular.

In addition to advocating the cause of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons, OIC supported the efforts to end the internal Palestinian division and conclude the reconciliation between the Fatah and Hamas movements.

However, the crises in the Arab region continued to overshadow the Palestine issue, as the fluid situation in “Arab Spring” countries continued to demote it from the agenda of the regional and international community.

In tracing OIC's interaction with the Palestine issue, there is no detectable change in 2016–2017; nothing different from what it had previously done during its long lifespan. Denunciation and condemnation are still the most prominent features of its responses to Israeli violations against the Palestinian people, or against Islamic and Christian holy sites in Palestine. OIC's political ceiling remains as high as

that of its sponsors, i.e., the Arab Peace Initiative put forward by Prince ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz at the Beirut Summit in 2002. At its summit held in Istanbul in April 2016, the OIC “emphasized the centrality of the cause of Palestine and Al Quds Sharif for the Muslim Ummah,” and

the need for the early convening of an International Peace Conference to set mechanisms to provide international protection for the Palestinian people and to end the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967 including East Jerusalem, in implementation of the relevant UN Resolutions and the Arab peace initiative.<sup>1</sup>

In the same context, the Secretary-General of the OIC, Yousef bin Ahmad al-Othaimeen, in his address at the Paris Conference (Conférence de Paris Pour la Paix au Proche-Orient), held on 15/1/2017, stated that the Arab Peace Initiative represented a historic, serious, and realistic opportunity, and that it was a brave step towards peace, stability, and security in the Middle East. Al-Othaimeen also stressed that East Jerusalem remains an integral part of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and is the capital of the State of Palestine.<sup>2</sup>

In light of the Israeli measures targeting *al-Aqsa* Mosque through the installation of metal detectors, the organization called for an emergency meeting at the level of foreign ministers of the OIC member states in 1/8/2017. OIC condemned Israel’s provocative actions, including the closure of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and the banning of Palestinian Muslims and Christians from exercising their natural right to worship at holy sites inside Jerusalem. They stressed their rejection of the actions taken by the occupying forces and warned that any similar steps in the future would be unacceptable and unlawful and should be confronted by the organization. They also categorically rejected the unlawful settlement practices and measures in the holy city of Jerusalem, including the building of illegal settlements.<sup>3</sup>

OIC Secretary-General al-Othaimeen revealed the financial statements of the organization’s Islamic Solidarity Fund in support of the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. They amounted to about \$27 million, starting from the fund’s foundation in 1974 until 2017.<sup>4</sup> As for the Islamic Development Bank, in 2016 it financed a project through UNRWA to reconstruct 260 houses destroyed during the 2014 GS war. The project’s budget amounted to \$10 million, in addition to \$2.5 million to provide hospitals, municipalities, water stations, and sewage plants with fuel.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in July 2017, the organization held an international conference in partnership with the United Nations Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. The conference addressed the role of the international system in the provision of political and economic support for Jerusalem. The organization called on the international community to assume its responsibilities to stop settlement activities and end the occupation of Palestinian lands occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, as well as finding a solution to the refugee problem under Resolution 194, leading to a two-state solution, considering that the only way to establish a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, OIC in 2016–2017 continued its usual course of action towards the Palestine issue, under the policies of sponsoring states. Denunciation, condemnation, and welcoming statements were its policies of choice, doing nothing to change the deteriorating political and humanitarian conditions suffered by the Palestinian people for nearly seven decades. This is the role that Muslim people have come to expect from the OIC towards their central cause of the ongoing OIC role takes place in the context of the split within the Arab and Islamic systems that bring the States of the region together, as well as due to the ever-widening gap between the ruling regimes and their peoples.

## ***Second: Turkey***

In 2014–2015, internal and external changes in Turkey resulted in a temporary decline of Turkish interest in the Palestine issue. Also, diplomatic ruptures with both Tel Aviv and Cairo limited the Turkish role in the cause. Frequent Turkish-Israeli meetings were held to restore relations. In the Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015, we predicted the restoration of relations between the two sides, in a manner which would “ease” the GS siege, and not “lift” it (as stipulated by the three publicised Turkish conditions for normalization). We also predicted the non-return of the “alliance” between the two sides that prevailed in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

The Turkish domestic agenda was tight in 2016–2017, at the top of which were the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016, the fight against the Parallel State Structure within state institutions, the military confrontation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*—PKK), and Turkish Foreign Policy’s overall accelerated path towards ironing out issues with a number of

States. This period also witnessed the most important event with regard to the Palestine issue: normalizing relations with Israel in June 2016.

Turkish foreign policy is determined by three factors; the internal situation in Turkey; regional and international changes; and the developments of the case being dealt with. Therefore, it is important to analyze the variables of Turkey's foreign policy, its causes and repercussions, before going into the different stages of the Turkish approach to the Palestine issue during the previous two years.

### **Foreign Policy Variables**

Starting 2015, Turkey witnessed heated debate over its foreign policy and the need to correct its course and return back to normal; discussions were not limited to researchers and media professionals; rather, officials from the ruling party and the government participated in them. The debate reached its peak with the resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu's government, with Binali Yildirim succeeding him as Prime Minister. The latter announced the framework for his government's foreign policy, "We'll increase the number of our friends and we'll decrease the number of our enemies."<sup>8</sup>

The main reasons for the revisions made to Turkish foreign policy, and for its variables, were:

First: Turkey's failure to make significant breakthroughs in foreign policy, particularly in Syria, especially after the change in the international position on the Assad regime, moving from its delegitimization, with a view to overthrowing it, to implicitly accepting cooperation with it to eliminate "terrorism."

Second: Turkey has paid the price of its positions in support of Arab revolutionary forces, whether politically, economically, socially, or at times at the expense of its security, including footing the bill for hosting more than three million Syrian refugees, facing incitement by some Arab countries, concealment of trade agreements such as the Ro-Ro maritime agreement with Egypt,<sup>9</sup> suspension of the Turkey-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) High Level Strategic Dialogue, and becoming a target of terrorist and suicide operations.

Third: The regional isolation suffered by Ankara after the break or decline of relations with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and later Russia.

Fourth: Turkey's domestic agenda being fraught with serious consecutive successive events, weakening Turkey's ability to focus on external matters, most notably the Gezi Park events in June 2013,<sup>10</sup> followed by the "judicial coup" at

the end of the same year.<sup>11</sup> Then came the PKK's resumption of their military operations in cities and towns south-east of the country in July 2015, in addition to several electoral battles, whose results and repercussions have influenced the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP).

Fifth: Western pressure on Turkey, in an attempt to re-incorporate it into the Western system, having shown a tendency towards a margin of independence in its foreign policy.

Sixth: The Turkish-Russian crisis against the backdrop of the downing of a Russian jet fighter in November 2015, which resulted in two strategic losses for Turkey: The first was a field-military one, taking place in the Syrian arena; and the second was political-strategic one, having to approach the Western position once again,<sup>12</sup> and then the obligations associated with rapprochement with Russia, with respect to the Syrian issue in particular.

Seventh: The failed coup attempt in July 2016, with all its military, security, political, and economic repercussions. The imposition of the state of emergency that is ongoing at the time of writing this report, the fight against the Parallel State Structure at home and abroad as a priority for the Turkish government; the increasing tension in Turkish-Western relations; and the pressure resulting from the coup attempt which signalled a message sent from abroad to Turkey's decision makers despite the failure of the attempt.

The strategic variables in the Turkish foreign policy have crystallized in three main contexts:

First: Searching for new partnerships in the region, as was the case with Qatar, then the attempt with KSA, and recently reaching understandings with Russia and Iran.

Second: The gradual shift from total reliance on “soft power” in foreign policy to what can be seen as an atypical situation with the use of brutal force, or what might be called “relative brutal force.” Examples include the development of the military industry, establishment of military bases abroad in both Qatar and Somalia, and cross-border military operations such as the Bashiqa camp, Operation Euphrates Shield, the Idlib operation.

Third: The attempts to restore relations, or iron out issues, and reduce tension with some States such as Russia, the UAE and Israel, following the principle “We'll increase the number of our friends and we'll decrease the number of our enemies.”<sup>13</sup>

## Relations with the Palestinian Sides

Given the previous two years, which witnessed the return of diplomatic relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv, the failed coup attempt, and other important changes in Turkey's foreign policy, it is important to address Turkish-Palestinian relations. Within this, two long-established elements must be taken into account: the PA and Hamas, and a new, third element: former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan.

At the official level, Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas made multiple visits to Turkey; in April 2016, he met with President Erdoğan in Turkey on the side-lines of the 13th OIC summit.<sup>14</sup> He repeated the visit in October 2016, during which he met with President Erdoğan, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and Parliament Speaker İsmail Kahraman.<sup>15</sup> The most important visit was in August 2017, with internal Palestinian reconciliation at the top of its agenda, along with bilateral relations, and the latest developments in occupied Palestine, especially with regard to Jerusalem, the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the "peace" process with Israel, according to a statement by the Turkish presidency.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that what helped 'Abbas to repeat these visits and to ask Ankara to play a role in the Palestinian reconciliation was his desire to balance Turkish relations with Hamas. He wanted to take advantage of the variables resulting from the normalization of relations, and to influence the rapprochement between Hamas and Dahlan, seeking to alleviate Arab pressure on him.

After Turkey and Israel restored their relations, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said that the PA welcomed the agreement, stressing that any Turkish efforts in GS should be through the Palestinian government.<sup>17</sup> The Minister also contacted his Turkish counterpart on behalf of President 'Abbas following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, congratulating Turkey "on the victory of democracy and defeat of the coupists."<sup>18</sup> Evidence for the improved relations between the two sides was Ankara's decision to directly transfer \$10 million to the PA Treasury for the first time, after having implemented projects in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 through the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*—TİKA), according to Palestinian Ambassador to Ankara Faed Mustafa. This decision was taken after Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah met with the Turkish president on the side-lines of the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding relations with Hamas, meetings continued between Hamas' leadership and Turkish officials, including then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's meeting with former Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Khalid Mish'al in Doha in April 2016.<sup>20</sup> However, the progress of negotiations between Ankara and Tel Aviv regarding restoration of relations, has put relations between Turkey and Hamas under scrutiny. Several reports revealed that Israel laid down the condition that Turkey must sever its relations with Hamas before the agreement could be implemented,<sup>21</sup> which was rejected by the Turkish side.<sup>22</sup> The Turkish foreign minister denied the existence of such a condition and stressed that meetings with the movement continued with the aim of achieving unity between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, and to contribute to the peace process in the Middle East, adding that Israel today also recognizes that there can be no lasting peace without Hamas.<sup>23</sup>

The Turkish side was keen to highlight the endorsement of the two most important Palestinian parties (Fatah/ the PA and Hamas) of the agreement, as Erdoğan hosted Mish'al two days before the agreement was announced,<sup>24</sup> and later pointed out that 'Abbas and Mish'al both assessed the situation positively.<sup>25</sup> Hamas' comment on the agreement was by a statement that avoided direct support, while it thanked the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and official and popular Turkish efforts to help the GS population and to ease the siege.<sup>26</sup> Ankara, in return, upheld its relations with Hamas despite Israeli complaints.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Erdoğan, in an interview on Israeli Channel 2, rejected the labelling of Hamas as a terrorist movement, but rather a political body established out of national considerations.<sup>28</sup>

After the agreement with Turkey was signed in Tel Aviv, Turkish official public meetings with Hamas stopped; a development later augmented to a certain extent by the change in Hamas' leadership, which moved into GS. However, unannounced meetings continued and a number of Hamas leaders participated in activities carried out by Turkish civil society organizations. In addition, communication via official statements and telephone calls continued to take place, for example Hamas' statement following the failed coup congratulating the Turkish people and Turkish leadership, led by President Erdoğan, on the failure of the military coup against their democratic choice.<sup>29</sup> The Turkish foreign minister, in a phone call, congratulated Isma'il Haniyyah on his new post as the Head of the Hamas Political

Bureau.<sup>30</sup> However, several Turkish statements established some distance from Hamas, for example the statement by the ambassador to Israel, Kemal Ökem, that “Turkey supported its people but not Hamas,”<sup>31</sup> while Turkish leaders commended Hamas’ political document,<sup>32</sup> and the reconciliation agreement with the Fatah Movement.<sup>33</sup>

The third side of the Palestinian triangle, Muhammad Dahlan, represented the negative side of Turkish-Palestinian relations during 2016–2017. Turkish media started to warn of his role in an imminent coup in Turkey,<sup>34</sup> and some reports said that he was planning to accuse Turkey of supporting ISIS using fabricated confessions made by his accomplices.<sup>35</sup> Following the failed coup attempt, Dahlan made the headlines in the Turkish press and media as the middleman through which the UAE orchestrated the coup d’état,<sup>36</sup> and even as the one responsible for previous riots such as the Gezi Park events in 2013. These reports were corroborated when the Dahlan-linked Alghad TV channel hosted Fethullah Gülen, the prime suspect in the failed coup attempt.<sup>37</sup> The pro-AKP *Yeni Şafak* newspaper warned that the UAE would continue to target Turkey via Dahlan, and that the Gulf crisis and siege of Qatar were a new phase in this targeting, although it was economic this time,<sup>38</sup> warning that Dahlan had established a military camp in Sinai, Egypt, to train thousands of fighters to carry out operations against Turkey, Sudan, and Qatar.<sup>39</sup>

This very dark image of Dahlan with regard to the Turkish context was one of the reasons for Ankara’s “friendly reproach” of Hamas for meeting with him in Cairo in June 2017. Some observers concluded that Ankara’s hosting of ‘Abbas afterwards was a clear message of dissatisfaction with this path.<sup>40</sup>

### **Turkish-Israeli Relations**

Since the diplomatic rupture following the Israeli assault on the Mavi Marmara, when 10 Turkish people were killed, Turkey insisted on three conditions for the normalization of its relations with Israel. These were: The issuing of an apology for what happened, payment of compensation to the victims’ families and lifting the GS siege. Meetings were frequent between the two sides, but with little effect until March 2013, when Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan under pressure from US President Barack Obama.<sup>41</sup> In 2014 Israel agreed to pay the victims’ families \$20 million in compensation but did not follow through with the payments.<sup>42</sup>

Since the second half of 2015, media campaigns between the two sides began to abate as a result of meetings that seemed to bring them close to signing the agreement, to the extent that the alleged Israeli role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016 took little part in the discussion.<sup>43</sup> This was even despite the openness of some Israeli officials about their desire for the coup against Erdoğan and the Turkish government to succeed.<sup>44</sup>

On 27/6/2016, the Turkish prime minister officially announced that they had reached an understanding that would restore diplomatic relations with Israel. He stressed that it would significantly contribute to the lifting of the GS blockade, noting that the normalization of relations covered all areas, and that economic relations and cooperation on issues related to the region were among the priorities of the two parties.<sup>45</sup>

Next day, Turkish President Erdoğan talked about the agreement, explaining that he discussed the matter with ‘Abbas and Mish‘al, and that the Palestinian officials had assessed the situation positively, stressing that Turkey has thus far rejected any conditions or pressure that would violate the rights of Palestinians. He added that a Turkish ship would travel, within days, to GS, loaded with an unprecedented 10 thousand tons (about 10 million kg) of humanitarian aid.<sup>46</sup>

In response to Israeli reports stating that the terms of the agreement included a Turkish commitment on Hamas’ military action against Israel,<sup>47</sup> the Anadolu News Agency quoted a senior Turkish official that the agreement did not include any clause related to Hamas.<sup>48</sup> Erdoğan also stressed during his interview on Channel 2 that Hamas was not a terrorist organization, but a political party that arose out of national considerations.<sup>49</sup>

Turkish officials were keen to emphasise that the agreement to normalise relations with Israel does not mean that Ankara would remain silent about Israeli violations, according to Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.<sup>50</sup> It did not involve a fundamental change in the Turkish position on the Palestine issue, as stated by the Spokesperson for the Turkish President, İbrahim Kalın.<sup>51</sup>

The terms of the agreement included the restoration of diplomatic ties between the two states, provided that Israel paid the victims’ families \$20 million in compensation. In exchange, “Israeli soldiers will be exempt from legal and criminal responsibility and individual Israeli nationals also would not be held criminally or financially liable for the incident.”<sup>52</sup>

Yildirim summed up the proposed next steps as follows:

First: Mutual assignment of ambassadors once the two sides ratify the agreement.

Second: The Turkish parliament and the Israeli cabinet to ratify the agreement.

Third: TOKİ, the Housing Development Administration of Turkey, to complete its projects in Gaza.

Fourth: The launching of major projects in the West Bank including the Jenin industrial zone.<sup>53</sup>

The Turkish parliament approved a draft law on the normalization of relations with Israel on 20 August,<sup>54</sup> which was approved by the President on 1/9/2016.<sup>55</sup>

When evaluating the agreement and its implications, positive measures to support the Palestinians are apparent, such as measures to ease the siege (which Israel would later go back on), or the potential for Turkey to apply pressure on Israel, or adjust its positions to pressure Israel at later dates. However, these supposed “positives” are hardly worth anything next to the strategic losses associated with the rapprochement of a Muslim State the size of Turkey with Israel. Intelligence and military coordination between the two parties resumed, and Israel made efforts to break the psychological barrier built by the Turkish people over the years. The two cooperated in international institutions, and that started before the conclusion of the agreement, Turkey dropped its “veto” on the participation of the Israel in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercises, and it did not object to the western European and others groups’ selection of an Israeli candidate to head the Legal Committee at the United Nations, which took place on 13/6/2016.<sup>56</sup>

The two sides accelerated their cooperation, with Israel appointing an ambassador to Ankara, and Turkey appointing an ambassador to Tel Aviv in November 2016.<sup>57</sup> A Turkish court dropped the lawsuits filed against the four Israeli officers who had been tried in absentia in the case of the attack on the Mavi Marmara ship in December of the same year.<sup>58</sup> In the same month, the two sides announced that they had started negotiations to build a gas pipeline to transfer natural gas from Israel to Europe.<sup>59</sup>

As expected, relations between the two sides did not return to their pre-AKP state, specifically their golden period in the 1990s. Rhetorical escalation by the two sides continued and was witnessed on several occasions. In May 2017, the Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein said that “Erdogan was, and remains, an enemy.”<sup>60</sup>

In addition, a dispute between the foreign ministers of the two states erupted after Erdoğan demanded Tel Aviv to remove metal detectors from *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017; The Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hüseyin Müftüoğlu described the remarks made by his Israeli counterpart Emmanuel Nahshon, in which he attacked the Turkish President, as “presumptuous.”<sup>61</sup>

Various official Turkish institutions condemned Israel’s actions; the Turkish Foreign Ministry called for the immediate lifting of the ban on the entry into *al-Aqsa* Mosque,<sup>62</sup> and the Turkish government Spokesperson Numan Kurtulmuş, stated that Israel’s closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque was a painful and unacceptable decision.<sup>63</sup> The Turkish President also had a phone call with his Israeli counterpart, in which he urged that restrictions on Muslims should be removed.<sup>64</sup>

As part of a series of Turkish statements on Jerusalem, the Turkish President said, “We will not allow *adhan* to be silenced in al-Quds,” commenting on a draft Israeli law calling for that. He considered that “debates on moving the U.S. embassy to al-Quds are extremely wrong.” He described that “‘ Hamas’ recently declared policy document as an important step for the Palestinian cause, and also for the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah.”<sup>65</sup> This was part of his speech at the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs. A series of activities and events held in Turkey in support of the Palestine issue, such as the first conference of Parliamentarians for Al-Quds, launched under the auspices the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and the Speaker of the Parliament, and with the participation of Erdoğan, the Prime Minister, and a large number of ministers and AKP representatives at the end of 2016.<sup>66</sup> Another example was the participation of Turkish officials in the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad held in February 2017 in Istanbul.<sup>67</sup> Ankara also commended the Cairo agreement between Fatah and Hamas under Egyptian auspices, which was signed on 12/10/2017, stating, “We will continue our support to all our Palestinian brothers to successfully advance Palestinian national reconciliation process, which we see essential for regional peace and security.”<sup>68</sup>

### **Economic Relations Between Turkey and Israel**

Turkey has made several steps towards the normalization of relations with Israel, and one of the most important terms of the Israeli-Turkish agreement in the second half of 2016 was that Israel and Turkey would start negotiations to build a gas pipeline extending from Israeli natural gas fields to Turkey.<sup>69</sup> According to

a statement by Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources Shaul Meridor in an interview with Bloomberg in December 2016, “Israel and Turkey are developing a framework for the export of Israeli natural gas to Turkey that would protect contracts between companies in lieu of diplomatic breakdowns,” and “that with such protections in place, it is possible for gas to begin flowing as early as 2019.”<sup>70</sup> On 27/6/2016, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim explained that the normalization of relations covered all areas, and that economic relations and cooperation on issues related to the region were among the priorities of the two parties.<sup>71</sup>

On the economic level, several visits were made between the two sides after normalization. Turkish Minister of Culture and Tourism Nabi Avcı arrived on 6/2/2017 with the Head of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies, Başaran Ulusoy; Head of the Federation of Turkish Hotel Owners, Osman Ayık; and Head of the Association of Turkish Tourism Investors Ali Murat Ersoy to Tel Aviv, as the first formal visit by a Turkish official since 2010. The delegation participated in the opening ceremony of the East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition (Emitt), met with Turkish and Israeli owners of tourism firms, and visited a photography exhibition of Turkish-Israeli relations organized by Anadolu Agency.<sup>72</sup> Avcı expressed hope that his country’s relations with Israel would contribute to ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He pointed out, “Over the past year, approximately 260,000 Israeli tourists have visited Turkey, and we want to see 600,000 Israeli tourists over the next.” The Turkish minister pointed out that the number of Turkish tourists who visited Israel during the past year reached 30 thousand, adding that he hoped this number would increase.<sup>73</sup>

Delegates from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Turkey and Israel held talks concerning economic issues in Ankara, on 26/4/2017. The head of the Israeli delegation, Head of the Economic Affairs Division and Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Yaffa Ben-Ari, told Israeli public radio, Kol Israel-Reshet Bet, that they discussed consolidating and stimulating economic cooperation, which was a continuation of the political dialogue between the directors of the Israeli and Turkish foreign ministries.<sup>74</sup>

A Turkish economic delegation, which included more than 120 entrepreneurs and executives, including exporters and general managers of major Turkish companies operating in the fields of energy, construction, aviation, food, and

agriculture, arrived in Israel in May 2017. The head of the Turkish delegation, Mehmet Buyukeksi, who is the chairman of the Turkish Exporters Assembly, “expressed his confidence that Israeli-Turkish trade volume could grow from today’s \$3.9 billion figure to \$10 billion, within five years time,” adding, “We believe that we have a huge potential together, and we also believe that international relations are optimized by means of business.”<sup>75</sup>

The Freedom Flotilla and Mavi Marmara incidents did not have a negative impact on trade relations between the two countries, as was anticipated. On the contrary, trade flourished; in March 2017, Eitan Na’eh, Israel’s ambassador to Turkey, affirmed that “bilateral trade can and should be doubled in the next few years to \$8 billion from \$4 billion.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Economic Relations Between Turkey and the Palestinians**

Turkish state and private donations to the Palestinians continued; in March 2016, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) started the implementation of a project aimed at the construction of 320 housing units in GS. The \$13-million project will include construction of 20 buildings, according to the Director of the Palestine Office at TİKA, Bülent Korkmaz.<sup>77</sup>

In May 2016, Turkey announced \$1.5 million support for Gaza hospitals aiming to meet the emergency needs in the GS health sector, in addition to the provision of fuel for 13 hospitals in GS for six months, and the provision of several types of medicines necessary for patient care under the supervision of the World Health Organization (WHO), and in coordination with the Ministry of Health and UNRWA.<sup>78</sup>

On 19/6/2016, the Turkish Association for the Protection and Restoration of Ottoman Heritage in Jerusalem and its Environs (Mirasimiz) renovated 45 historic mosques and more than 70 old houses in the city of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, according to Halis Mutlu, an official at the association. Mutlu stated that there were four thousand old houses that needed maintenance in the Old City of Jerusalem, pointing out that the owners of these houses refused to sell them despite receiving high offers, adding that Israel wants to cleanse Jerusalem of Muslims.<sup>79</sup>

On 7/7/2016, 36 trucks carrying Turkish aid entered GS via the Kerm Abu Salem crossing, south of GS; the trucks were loaded with food, as well as industrial diesel for the power plant.<sup>80</sup>

In July 2016, a delegation from the Turkish Ministry of Energy, headed by Consul General of Turkey in Jerusalem, in Gaza, Ambassador Mustafa Sarnıç, arrived in GS via the Beit Hanoun (Erez) Crossing to study possible ways to solve the electricity crisis that had been worsening for 10 years. The Turkish delegation held several meetings with officials at the Hamas-run Energy Authority in GS to find optimal solutions to the electricity crisis. The delegation of the Turkish Ministry of Energy also held a meeting with officials at the Palestinian Energy Authority in Ramallah, to learn about their vision and position on ways to solve the electricity crisis; the delegation met with Israeli officials for the same purpose.<sup>81</sup>

On 10/6/2017, the Minister of Education and Higher Education Sabri Sidem announced that the Turkish Parliament had ratified the agreement on cooperation in education between Palestine and Turkey. Sidem said that all those who spoke at the Turkish parliament session stressed the importance of supporting Palestine and the Palestinian education sector. He pointed out that the agreement signed between the two sides included the promotion of academic cooperation in all fields of education, in addition to the introduction of Turkish tablet computer technology to Palestinian schools within the FATIH project (Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology), and in line with the Palestinian government's decision to "digitize" education.<sup>82</sup>

During the period 21–23/6/2017, 19 Turkish trucks arrived in GS via the Kerm Abu Salem crossing, carrying clothes, stationery, toys for children, food parcels, bicycles, and wheelchairs.<sup>83</sup> In September 2017, the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH) distributed *udhiyah* (sacrificial animal) meat to about six thousand poor families in GS. According to reports by international agencies, 80% of the GS population had become dependent on international assistance for a living due to poverty and unemployment, while 40% still lived below the poverty line.<sup>84</sup>

As for the the trade volume between the two sides, it fell from \$5.83 billion in 2014 to \$4.4 billion in 2015, then dropped further to \$4.34 billion in 2016. It rose again in 2017 to \$4.91 billion (see table 1/7).

Chemical materials and their derivatives used in manufacturing, especially generators, and electrical transformers, top the list of Turkish exports to Israel, while cars, iron, and steel top Turkey's list of imports from Israel.<sup>85</sup>

**Table 1/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and Israel According to Turkish and Israeli Statistics 2014–2017 (\$ millions)<sup>86</sup>**

Year	Turkish exports to Israel		Turkish imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics
<b>2017</b>	3,409.5	2,895.9	1,505.1	1,414.2	4,914.6	4,310.1
<b>2016</b>	2,955.5	2,601.7	1,385.6	1,297.7	4,341.1	3,899.4
<b>2015</b>	2,698.1	2,446	1,672.5	1,701.1	4,370.6	4,147.1
<b>2014</b>	2,950.9	2,683.6	2,881.3	2,755.6	5,832.2	5,439.2

In contrast, Turkish imports from the PA territories decreased from \$2.5 million in 2014 to \$2.3 million in 2015, then rose to \$3.4 million in 2016 and \$5 million in 2017. Turkish exports to the PA fluctuated considerably, falling from \$90.9 million in 2014 to \$82.2 million in 2015, then going up to \$94.4 million in 2016, and dropping to \$87.5 million in 2017<sup>87</sup> (see table 2/7).

The trade balance between the two countries was tipped significantly in favour of Turkey. While fresh and dried fruits such as figs, pineapples, avocados, guavas, and mangoes topped the list of Turkish exports to the PA territories, the latter exports baked goods such as bread, cookies and biscuits, in addition to rose water, etc., to Turkey.<sup>88</sup>

**Table 2/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and PA According to Turkish Statistics 2014–2017 (\$ thousands)<sup>89</sup>**

Year	Turkish exports to PA territories	Turkish imports from PA territories	Trade volume
<b>2017</b>	87,492.5	4,974.7	92,467.2
<b>2016</b>	94,372.1	3,363.9	97,736
<b>2015</b>	82,224.2	2,343	84,567.2
<b>2014</b>	90,944.5	2,502.3	93,446.8

## **Turkish Role Prospects and Determinants**

Despite its willingness, and despite enjoying good relations with the two sides of the internal Palestinian equation, Turkey still does not play a prominent role in the Palestine issue when it comes to the internal reconciliation process, and that is due to Egypt's almost complete monopoly of this issue.

On the Palestinian-Israeli level, concerning the peace process, the exchange of prisoners and soldiers between Israel and Hamas, or efforts to lift the GS siege, the chances of Turkey playing a role, albeit weak, still exist. They rely heavily on balancing the enabling factors, as well as disabling factors that obstruct Turkey from playing an active role on this issue.

Among the most important incentives for Turkey to play a major role, whether now or in the future, are:

First: Turkey's own desire to play an active role, being aware of the importance of the Palestine issue.

Second: Restored relations between Turkey and Israel may theoretically open the door for the former to activate its role, which was not possible during the rupture between them. Ankara has emphasized that it is in the Palestinians' interest.

Third: Recent progress in the "Palestinian reconciliation" could contribute to the acceleration of the peace process.

Fourth: Turkey's desire to be a mediator in the exchange of prisoners between Hamas and Israel.<sup>90</sup>

Fifth: Gaps left by the decline of the Egyptian role in the region may help Ankara to increase its activity.

However, there are real obstacles and challenges to any effective and influential Turkish role, namely:

First: Israel's denial of the two-state solution, considering it a thing of the past.

Second: The confidence gap between Ankara and Tel Aviv—despite the restoration of diplomatic ties—and their mutual alienation, fuelled by the long period of rupture, are difficult to erase or overcome quickly.

Third: The stalemate of the Palestine issue's various paths, making intervention difficult for a state like Turkey. For in recent years, it has approached this issue only during times of escalation and serious incidents, such as the assaults on GS.

Fourth: Pressing internal issues in Turkey, distracting it from playing important roles in the region in general and in the Palestine issue in particular.

Fifth: Heated regional issues, which are exhausting Turkey's efforts, particularly the Syrian and Iraqi issues.

Sixth: Tel Aviv's activity against Turkish interests in the region, including cooperation with Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus in the natural gas field, its alleged role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016,<sup>91</sup> and its support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, which Ankara opposes.<sup>92</sup>

By comparing enabling and disabling factors, Turkey's chances of playing an active role in the Palestine issue currently appear weak, particularly in the next two years, 2018 and 2019. These years will be a time of preparation for the important upcoming elections in Turkey, namely the municipal elections in March 2019, and the concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections in November of the same year. Radical or rapid changes in the aforementioned factors are unlikely to take place.

In the long term, however, current and future variables could lead to new developments with regard to Turkey's role in the Palestine issue, including:

**First: The Crisis in Turkey-US Relations:** Relations between the two sides have recently undergone multiple and successive crises, with the US support for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*—PYD) and its military role in Syria, and Washington's delay in the extradition of Fethullah Gülen being the major outstanding issues between the two sides.<sup>93</sup>

There is no doubt that this conflict of interests between the US and Turkey, on the one hand, and the rapprochement between the latter and Russia, on the other, opened up new prospects and possibilities in terms of its policies in the region for Ankara that had not been previously available. Relations with Israel and the approach to the Palestine issue remain among the most important foundations of US policy in the region, and relations with Ankara could be subject to further deterioration and might perhaps become a crisis. Therefore, it is logical to anticipate a change in Turkish attitudes towards the Palestine issue, seeking to become more involved, while relations with Washington remain in decline.

**Second: Tension with the EU:** The accession of Turkey to EU membership appears at an impasse at the time of writing, and there have been calls at the

EU to cancel the entire accession process following the European Parliament's recommendation to freeze negotiations.<sup>94</sup> This, on the whole, gives Ankara some freedom from potential European “custody” of its foreign policy.

**Third: Rapprochement with Iran:** Tension reached its peak between the two sides in 2015, when Turkey condemned Iran's sectarian policies, and Iran responded with the implicit threat of turning Syria into a graveyard for Turkish soldiers.<sup>95</sup> After that peak, things started to ease and a language of coordination and understanding developed, reaching a high level of coordination and cooperation, given the common risks and threats faced by both countries, in particular the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, the strained relations between Turkey and the West, and the harsh US rhetoric towards Iran.<sup>96</sup>

There is no doubt that rapprochement between the two regional capitals, which is likely to continue in the short term, will widen the confidence gap between Ankara and Tel Aviv. It remains a determining factor in the Turkish role in the Palestine issue. Other dramatic developments may occur in the region, such as a possible confrontation on any level between KSA and Iran, the activation of Gulf-Arab normalization with Israel, with all its consequences, or additional US sanctions against Tehran or others.

**Fourth: Heading East:** Since 2002, Turkey, under AKP, has been keen to pursue, albeit gradually, a multidimensional or multi-pronged policy, with the aim of developing balance and flexibility, attempting to detach itself from the Western domination experienced during the Cold War.<sup>97</sup> The most notable effort in this regard has been its request to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and its acquisition of a “dialogue partner” status in 2013.<sup>98</sup>

Turkey had planned to sign a \$3.4 billion contract to buy an air defense system from China in 2013, but two years later it dismissed this option, saying that it would focus on developing a domestic system.<sup>99</sup> Turkey then signed a deal in September 2017 to purchase the S-400 missile system from Russia.<sup>100</sup>

This move suffered a setback in 2015 because of the crisis which followed the downing of the Russian jet fighter; however, relations between the two sides were restored very quickly, resulting in large-scale understandings over the Syrian crisis, including reaching a tripartite framework composed of the two countries besides Iran.

Undoubtedly, this steadily developing trend will allow Turkey to enjoy more room to manoeuvre, broadening its scope of action and influence, away from US and Western pressure, including with regard to the Palestine issue, especially if we take into account the strained Turkey-US and Turkey-Europe relations, which seem unlikely to see major breakthroughs soon.

**Fifth: Presidential System Implementation:** The AKP trusts that the introduction of presidential system in November 2019 will enable Turkey to make quicker, stronger, and more vital foreign policy decisions. It would subjugate other decision-making circles and institutions to the elected political leadership, including the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which have played an important role in the overall foreign policy, particularly in Israeli-Turkish relations. This might indicate that the presidential system—with the likely success of an AKP candidate, whoever he/ she might be—will be in the Palestine issue's favour.

**Sixth: Solution of Syrian Crisis:** The solution in Syria has started with the participation of various parties, including Turkey. Therefore, it is self-evident to say that despite its difficulties, obstacles, and long duration, the solution will ease Turkey's exhaustion of resources and will allow it to develop a more active and influential foreign policy, including its policy towards the Palestine issue.

**Seventh: Breakthrough in Turkey-Egypt Relations:** Such a breakthrough is not anticipated to occur in the near future, but, in principle, it is not rejected by either of them. Both sides have already taken several initial steps in this direction; for example, examples of economic delegations during the reporting period.<sup>101</sup> If a breakthrough of this kind happens, it will be possible for Ankara to play a role on the political level, as well as in the context of dealing with the GS siege. A quick comparison between Turkey's achievements during the 2012 GS war, when relations with Cairo were good, and that of the 2014 war, when relations were suspended, indicates how a breakthrough in bilateral relations could unlock the potential of a Turkish role in the Palestine issue.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkey faces many obstacles to playing an active and positive role in the Palestine issue, due to its relations with the various parties, and because of local and regional crises affecting its foreign policy decision-making. Nevertheless, several variables anticipated in the medium and long terms can, if they occur and interact,

open up new prospects for Turkey to perform an active role in this regard. There is the potential for the Palestinians take advantage of these variables, accelerate and stabilize them, as well as using them as a foundation to build on.

### ***Third: Iran***

Iran has not been detached from the regional transformations, nor was it detached from the “raging crises” and their regional and international interactions, and their impact on its national security and internal concerns. Iran, has too its own priorities, concerns, and vision for the future of the region. However, concerning Iran’s policy toward the Palestine issue, two points are important:

First: The principles of this policy are inseparable from the Palestinian action itself, which imposes itself as a priority not only on Iran’s policies but on the policies of other Islamic states. This means that the stronger and more active this action is, for example the “Stabbing *Intifadah*,” Gaza’s resistance, or any political or diplomatic action, Iran’s attitudes will necessarily be more active and more visible towards the Palestine issue.

Second: Iran always expresses its commitment to the Palestine issue, not concerning the human rights of the Palestinian people, the two-state solution, peace, or other formalities agreed upon by most other countries, rather by concerning its firm commitment to resistance against Israel. All the positions and statements of Iran’s political and military leaders assert this commitment. Thus, Iran differs from the other Islamic states, which declare and affirm their commitment to peaceful initiatives, or even go beyond that to reach direct normalization, even when a peaceful settlement is not achieved. Iranian positions during 2016–2017 were consistent with its commitment to resistance, evidenced by the statements of Iran’s political and military leaders.

When US President Donald Trump raised the level of threat against Iran after taking office at the White House, stating that all options were available to deal with it, he not only linked these threats to Iran’s ballistic missile tests, but also what he saw as “Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism.” What is meant by this “terrorism” is Iran’s known support for the resistance.

In this context, semi-official Iranian websites revealed the EU's conditions for restoration of relations with Tehran following the nuclear deal, describing them as "shameless," because they contained 10 points, including, "support for hostile armed groups in the region, including the military wing of Hezbollah."<sup>103</sup>

### **The Iranian Threat to Israel**

Iran has never ceased to threaten Israel, nor has it ceased its calls to resist it, and to work to end its existence; for example:

- Commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh stated that Iranian missiles are available to the peoples of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, as well as all the oppressed in the world. He said that Israel is cornered by Islamic countries, will not last long and will collapse at war even before launching these missiles. He added that the evil actions of Israel are perfectly clear, and that Iranian missiles had been designed with a two-thousand km range with the aim of facing Israel from a distance.<sup>104</sup>
- During missile tests, the IRGC launched missiles which bore the catchphrase of the late Ayatollah Khomeini about wiping Israel from existence. A correspondent of the Fars News Agency dispatched to the exercise area stated that, on the second day of the final phase of the IRGC's missile tests, two Qadr/ Ghadr H missiles were launched from the eastern Alborz heights (north-east of Iran) towards targets on the Makran coast (southern Iran), covering a distance of 1,400 km. The missiles bore the Hebrew phrase, "Israel must be wiped out" (לעמ קחמיהל הכירצ לארשי).<sup>105</sup>
- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei predicted that Israel will cease to exist within 25 years. Khamenei said, "Despite the constant creation of various crises by the supporters of the Zionist regime with the purpose of consigning the issue of Palestine to oblivion, this holy land will be liberated in the shade of the resistance and jihad of the Palestinian people and groups."<sup>106</sup>
- General Ahmad Karimpour, a senior military adviser to Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, announced "All targets in Israel have been defined and our long-range missiles will destroy them within 7 minutes and 30 seconds, in case Iran was subjected to any attack." He stressed that Tehran was ready to respond in a resolute and destructive manner

to any military attack, explaining that when the Leader of the Revolution (Ali Khamenei) says that Iran will reduce Tel Aviv and Haifa to dust within 7 minutes if necessary, it is no joke; all Iranian cities are prepared for these operations. Then, he added, let “Zionist the entity and its allies” know that.<sup>107</sup> The same attitude was reiterated regarding the demise of Israel by the newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army, Abdul Rahim al-Musawi.<sup>108</sup>

These positions, echoed by the Iranian political and military leadership regarding the very existence of the Israel, prompted Major General Yoav Galant, a minister and member of the cabinet, to emphasise that Iran is the biggest threat facing Israel:

Iran is working against us in five areas: in Gaza, by supporting Hamas and [other] terrorist organizations, mainly the Islamic Jihad; through Hizbullah and building Hizbullah up; in Judea and Samaria, by attempts to operate terrorist cells; through ongoing attempts to enlist Israeli Arabs who will take action against the nation; and through terrorist attacks abroad, which are carried out by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hizbullah against Israeli and Jewish targets.<sup>109</sup>

### **Supporting the Question of Palestine**

Iran is committed to its positions, based on the following fundamental commitments:

- The centrality of the Palestine issue.
- Defending the Palestinian people.
- Supporting the Palestinian resistance.

Therefore, Iran’s leaders emphasize these fundamentals in Friday *Khutbahs* (sermons), at Jerusalem Day rallies, and at the international conferences held in Tehran to support the *Intifadah*.

At the opening of the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada in the Iranian capital Tehran, the Supreme Leader said, “An intelligent quest in history shows that no people in any era of history have ever been subject to such pain, suffering and cruelty,” adding, “The intifada that has begun for the third time in the occupied lands, is subject to more suppression than the previous two,” He described the Palestinians as “the great people of Palestine, who shoulder the heavy burden of confronting global Zionism and its bullying supporters.” He

asserted, “Our position on the Resistance is a fundamental position, one which has nothing to do with any particular group,” describing the Palestinian people as “the true leaders of fighting and of the Resistance.”<sup>110</sup>

Chairman of the Assembly of Experts of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ahmad Jannati emphasized that the Iranian people would remain in the arena until the “entire Zionist entity” was removed from the land of Palestine. At the International Jerusalem Day rally in Qom Province south of Tehran, he stated that the fasting Iranian people, who were participating in the International Jerusalem Day rally, had sent a message to the US and Israel that they will defend the Palestinian principles, driven by Islamic and moral teachings, as well as the principles of brotherhood.

The rallies set off under the slogan “Unity of the Muslim Ummah, Support for the Palestine Intifadah, and Renunciation of the Zionist Entity and Takfiri Terrorism.”

In a statement on the side-lines of the rallies, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that the message of the Iranian Muslim people throughout the country was that the Palestinian people are not alone, and that the Iranians will remain on the side of the Palestinian people and the oppressed across the world. He affirmed that victory would be achieved through continued steadfastness and resistance. President Rouhani described Israel as a base for arrogance, led by the United States, in the region.<sup>111</sup>

The Jerusalem Day rallies took place again in 2017 on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, and millions of Iranians took part in mass demonstrations in all Iranian provinces. Demonstrators carried banners and pictures condemning Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people and Israeli actions in Jerusalem and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, confirming their support for the Palestinian people, the Palestine issue. Iranian officials, led by President Hassan Rouhani and Ali Larijani, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, as well as military commanders of IRGC and the military, took part in the demonstrations in Tehran.<sup>112</sup>

The Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who met a PIJ delegation, headed by its Secretary General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shalah on 1/5/2016, emphasized the priority of the Palestine issue, and the belief that the goal of the Muslim world and the Palestinian groups should focus on warding off the “risk of the Zionist entity.” He added that any action aimed at undermining the Palestine issue as the primary issue of the Muslim world, or aimed at underestimating the danger of Israel, is

unacceptable, and stressed the need for unity among the Palestinian factions.<sup>113</sup> Zarif pointed out that one of the new Iranian foreign policy objectives was to draw the attention of the Muslim world back once again to the most important common issue of the Muslim world, the Palestine issue.<sup>114</sup>

Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani also stressed the need for unity among Muslim countries in support of the Palestinian people, indicating that defending Palestine remains a central issue for his country. In meeting Palestinian factions in Tehran, on 13/2/2016, Larijani said that Iran considers defending the Palestinian people a religious duty. He declared Iran's readiness to support the families of the "Jerusalem *Intifadah*'s martyrs," and to reconstruct homes destroyed by Israel, adding that the policy of incitement to sectarian strife in the region aims to divert attention from Palestine.<sup>115</sup>

The Iranian Foreign Ministry welcomed the UN resolution on the illegality of the construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Bahram Qasemi, Speaker for the Foreign Ministry, said that this move was "a sign of the global community's resolve to end the Zionist regime's occupation and restore the rights of the Palestinian people." Qasemi added, "The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes any move which will guarantee materialization of the true demands of Palestinians and promotion of the international status of Palestine in line with opposition against the occupation of the Zionist regime and its expansionist policies." He said, "Evidently, the policies and measures of the Zionist regime to expand settlements in Palestinian territories is in full contradiction with International Law and regulations, repeatedly emphasized by the Islamic Republic of Iran."<sup>116</sup>

Larijani denounced the fact that some Muslim States had established relations with Israel, saying that the strategy would backfire.<sup>117</sup>

Iran denounced the Israeli closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque before Muslim worshippers in the summer of 2017. Foreign Ministry Speaker Bahram Qasemi said, "The Israeli regime's move to shut down *al-Aqsa* Mosque and to cancel Friday prayers is against fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law," adding, "in addition to all crimes, aggressions, and violations of the Palestinians' basic rights, the Israeli regime has targeted the religious freedom and rights of the Palestinian Muslims, which will bring about dangerous consequences." While highlighting the importance of the re-opening of *al-Aqsa* Mosque as soon as possible,

Qasemi called on all independent countries and the international community to put pressure on Israel so that the basic rights of people in the occupied territories would be observed.<sup>118</sup> Thousands of Iranians also took part in a rally in the capital Tehran in support of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, condemning Israeli violations in it.<sup>119</sup>

### **Relations with Hamas and Palestinian Resistance Factions**

Iran continued to support the Palestinian resistance factions in both 2016 and 2017. Relations with Hamas, which had deteriorated in previous years, mainly due to differences over the Syrian crisis, saw remarkable progress during these two years, as evidenced by in bilateral meetings, changed attitudes, and statements. Hamas leader Usama Hamdan, who was part of a Hamas delegation that visited Tehran on 10–17/2/2016, confirmed that the delegation found support for the resistance and the *Intifadah* in Palestine. Hamdan hoped that the visit would be a prelude to a new chapter of cooperation between Hamas and Iran. He said that their visit came at the invitation to participate in the 37th anniversary celebrations of the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran.<sup>120</sup> On another Iran visit by a Hamas delegation, on 20/10/2017, Hamdan stressed that Hamas' relations with Iran dated back over more than 25 years, and that over the decades, Iranian support for the Palestinian people and the Palestine issue had not ceased, and that it was normal that relations pass through some stages where a divergence of views occurs. He stressed that relations with Iran "are going through a new stage, and I can say with confidence that they are more stable than ever before."<sup>121</sup>

Hamas' Political Affairs Officer Musa Abu Marzuq had stressed that no Arab or Muslim State provided real support for the Palestinian resistance like Iran did, emphasising the importance of relations with the latter and its continued support for the resistance in the face of Israeli aggression.<sup>122</sup>

'Abbas Zaki, member of Fatah's Central Committee and a member of the Palestinian delegation to Tehran, said that it was in the Palestinians' interest that Iran be a strong country, calling on partners to be good neighbours to it. Zaki added that any sectarian division in the region was "damaged goods," which only corrupt individuals would resort to, stressing that there should be no battles other than that of Palestine, and that the Palestinians count on their brothers in Iran due to Tehran's growing role.<sup>123</sup>

Hamas Political Bureau member Sami Abu Zuhri affirmed that the movement had contacted Iran to strengthen bilateral relations, and that Hamas was keen to

build balanced and close relations with all Arab and Muslim parties.<sup>124</sup> Hamas representative to Tehran, Khalid Qaddumi, also stressed that bilateral relations were improving by the day. He said in an exclusive statement to the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), that Palestine was the joint link between Iran and Hamas, and that Palestine remained the most important common issue between the two sides. He added that there was no disagreement on the question of Palestine, adding that the two sides were convinced that they cannot operate independently of each other, because the main common ground between both sides is the confrontation with Israel.<sup>125</sup>

Hamas leader in GS Mahmud al-Zahhar, also confirmed these relations by saying that the resistance in GS could not counter any Israeli aggression without Iranian military support. “which alone is not enough.”<sup>126</sup>

The importance of this support is its sustainability on the one hand, and its military and armament dimension on the other, which is an indispensable requirement of the resistance in GS. Whereas the support provided by some states to GS is limited to civil, health, and social assistance. For many reasons, these States do not go beyond this kind of support towards any military support. Even their financial support for the Strip often goes through the PA. Such support is at risk of stopping at any moment due to regional pressures.

Assuring the return of close bilateral relations, an IRGC statement denied any statements attributed to them against Hamas, saying:

Hamas... is at the forefront of the Palestinian nation's anti-Zionist resistance and struggle... the Palestinian nation's experience in the battle against the Israeli regime demonstrates that 'negotiation and compromise' would only encourage the Zionist enemy in its policy of continued occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

The statement also referred to resistance as “the only strategy that can help Palestine achieve its goals, hailing Hamas and other genuine Palestinian fighters for pursuing that strategy in recent years.”<sup>127</sup>

In the same regard, Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force Qassem Soleimani congratulated Isma'il Haniyyah on his election as head of the Hamas Political Bureau in May 2017, saying, “We are hopeful about your efforts on institutionalizing resistance along the Hamas' jihadi line,” and “We await strengthening of unity with Hamas, the ally of resistance axis, to raise the issue of Palestine again.” Soleimani

underlined “the evil plots of Zionism and global Arrogance who seek weakening the Islamic Ummah; ‘they are trying to distract Ummah’s jihad from its Islamic path and are seeking seizure of the Holy Qudas while the supporters of the city lack the will to save it.’” He stressed the need for everyone’s devotion to serve Palestine, and that “we should not allow its cause to be a victim of others’ interests or strife.” He expressed his aspiration for a wise administration that promises a brighter future, where internal crises are addressed sensibly.<sup>128</sup>

Emphasizing the priority of the Palestine issue, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif welcomed the visit of the Hamas delegation to the Islamic Republic of Iran, stressing the importance of the Palestine issue in Iranian foreign policy and the need for establishing relations with the Palestinian resistance factions, led by Hamas. Zarif said that Iran was ready to put aside all differences for the sake of supporting Palestine, the Palestinian people, and unity of the Muslim *Ummah*.<sup>129</sup>

As a reflection of this positive shift in relations between Hamas and Tehran, Secretary General of International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, made a televised speech at a ceremony held in GS, on 22/6/2017. He said, “I repeat the warning about the dangerous move made by some states in the region seeking to assert normalization of relations with the Zionist entity,” indicating that “this step will not promote the interests of Palestine and the regional countries.” He added that “efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia—in addition to other states—and the Zionist entity are a betrayal of the ideals of Islam. Palestinian refugees must return to their ancestral land, and history will show us that this will happen.” This was the first time an Iranian official had taken part in a ceremony in Gaza in such a manner, according to officials of the Palestinian factions.<sup>130</sup>

A delegation of Hamas leaders took part in the inauguration ceremony of President Hassan Rouhani, headed by Political Bureau member and Hamas’ Arab and Islamic Relations Officer ‘Izzat al-Rishq, in addition to Usama Hamdan, Saleh al-‘Aruri, and Zaher Jabarin also meeting Iranian officials. Al-Rishq thanked Iran’s support of the Palestinian people and their resistance, stressing that the movement wants to communicate with the Muslim *Ummah* (nation), hence Hamas’ relations with Iran, in order to serve the Palestine issue, which is considered the central cause of this *Ummah*. Al-Rishq said that Hamas believed that Muslim world unity

is necessary, and that differences must be put aside, and energies focused on the common enemy: the occupation. Both sides stressed that they had started a new chapter in bilateral relations, aiming to confront the common enemy, and to support Palestine, the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and the resistance.<sup>131</sup>

In October 2017, following the declaration of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, there was a remarkable development in strengthening Hamas' relations with Iran. A high-level delegation from Hamas, headed by Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau Saleh al-'Aruri, visited Iran on the first foreign tour after signing a reconciliation agreement with Fatah in Cairo, "to strengthen relations with Iran at the highest possible level." At the same time, Hamas Chairman in the Gaza Strip Yahya al-Sinwar emphasized that "Iran is the largest provider of weapons, funds, and training for the Al-Qassam Brigades," adding, "Whoever thinks we will sever our ties with Iran is delusional."

Hamas sources told the *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper that the movement had responded to Israel in two ways: The first was the announcement by al-Sinwar that "disarming Hamas is a snowball's chance in hell," and the second was the presence of a high-level delegation from the movement in Tehran. The sources added, "Israel does not make decisions for Hamas. Israel is the enemy, and our relations with Fatah, Iran, or any other party is an internal affair." Hamas official Taher al-Nunu said, "We want strong relations with Iran, and we will not abandon our friends and allies in the region. We have come a long way to re-strengthen strategic relations with Tehran."<sup>132</sup>

Thus, in 2016 and 2017, the most important development with regard to Iran's relations with the Palestinian factions was the evolution of its relations with Hamas. If 2016 was a prelude to the restoration of relations between the two sides, 2017 was the time to set aside the differences of the preceding period, and to reaffirm the persistence of these relations to confront their common challenges.

## Conclusion

It is expected that relations will strengthen between Hamas and the other resistance forces on the one hand and Iran on the other in the coming stage, especially with the increasing political, economic, and security pressure facing the resistance forces and the Islamic movements in the region, and with the escalation of Israeli extremism and US pressure.

Western powers and their allies in the region will try to play the card of sectarian strife and divert attention towards a conflict with Iran rather than Israel. This will push the Palestinian resistance forces, especially the Islamic ones, into greater coordination and cooperation with Iran regarding the Palestine issue; regardless of their disagreement with Iran's regional policies, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

## ***Fourth: Other Muslim States***

### **1. Malaysia**

Malaysia's policy towards the Palestine issue did not witness any major changes in 2016–2017 and its official and public support continued. In January 2016, an Israeli delegation that was supposed to take part in the Youth Sailing World Championship withdrew after the Malaysian authorities set certain conditions for the delegation's visas, including refraining from raising the Israeli flag, or wearing any symbol on their attire and surfboards that showed their country of origin.<sup>133</sup>

Malaysia has relinquished its right to host the 2017 International Football Federation (Fifa) Congress because of Israel's participation in it. In this regard, Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi stressed, "Malaysia was unable to provide visas to Israeli officials because it did not have diplomatic ties and could rile up local sensitivities."<sup>134</sup>

The Malaysian role emerged at the end of 2016 when it participated in the adoption of a draft resolution submitted to the UN Security Council condemning Israeli settlement building; the draft had been previously pulled back by Egypt under Israeli pressure. The resolution was passed by a majority of 14 votes (out of 15), with the US abstaining from voting. The administration of President Barack Obama did not respond to Israeli pressure to veto the resolution.<sup>135</sup>

The Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs ordered police to ban the "Jerusalem Jubilee," which a Chinese association had been working on. Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs Zahid Hamidi said that, "When the sentiments of Muslims are affected, and their feelings offended... I as Home Minister order the police to ban the meeting." Hamidi stressed that celebrating Israel's occupation of Palestine

offended Malaysians. Organizers were also summoned for interrogation after more than 32 police reports were lodged against the event.<sup>136</sup>

On a different note, Hamidi called on the Muslim *Ummah* to thwart efforts to transfer the so-called “capital of Israel” from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In a speech on the side-lines of the International Conference of Ulama, Hamidi said that Palestine must be recognized as an independent state, and Palestinians must be allowed to determine the course that their government would take. He pointed out that “despite the existence of different doctrines in Islam, we must work together to defend Islam,” condemning the atrocities committed by Israel against the Palestinians in Jerusalem.<sup>137</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Malaysian authorities are still open to all Palestinian parties, including Hamas, and Malaysia refused to submit to any external pressure to prevent the reception of Hamas leaders. Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakr stated in a press conference, “If they come in peace and don’t create any problems, then what is the issue? We don’t have a problem. This is a free country...we will accept whoever that does not cause trouble.”<sup>138</sup> In this regard, a delegation from Hamas participated in the 62nd annual conference of the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*—PAS), which was held in 2016. Another delegation visited Malaysia in 2017 and met with Malaysian leaders.

## **2. Indonesia**

Israel’s attempts to establish relations with the Muslim world continue at an ever-increasing pace, working hard towards achieving concrete breakthroughs, similar to those achieved with other states that had long been supportive of the Palestine issue. However, these normalization attempts are yet to yield results with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan. The Palestine issue continues to receive the attention of the Indonesian people. In March 2016, the Indonesian capital hosted an OIC extraordinary summit on Palestine and Jerusalem. Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, said, “We also cannot let the situation in the Islamic world and the threats of terrorism and extremism, divert our attention from the issue of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif,” adding, “The Declaration provides a clear message that the OIC Member States are united and committed to lend its support for Palestine.”<sup>139</sup>

Later in 2016, the Israeli authorities prevented the Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs from reaching Ramallah to hold a meeting with President ‘Abbas

and to attend the opening of an Indonesian honorary consulate in Ramallah.<sup>140</sup> In response, in February 2017, the Indonesian authorities prevented an Israeli aircraft transporting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from Singapore to Australia from passing through Indonesian airspace, forcing it to change course.

Apparently, the notion of belonging to the Muslim *Ummah* in the largest Muslim State, has a major role in refusing Israeli attempts to normalize relations with Indonesia. Netanyahu talked about this, saying “It’s time for there to be official relations between Indonesia and Israel.”<sup>141</sup> It is clear that Israel will exploit the eagerness of some Arab regimes to normalize relations with it in order to develop its diplomatic relations with other Muslim States and the states supporting the Palestine issue. However, this might not be achieved while the populations of these countries stand by the Palestinian people and their rights.

### 3. Pakistan

In 2016–2017, Pakistan pursued its traditional policy of support for the Palestine issue; the permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN, Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi, said, “Pakistan, for its part, remains committed to supporting the Palestinians in their decades-long legitimate struggle for their rights and for dignity.” During her participation in a UN Security Council meeting on “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question,” in April 2016, Lodhi pointed out that:

The current Israeli leadership is fast closing the possibility for a two-state solution, formally accepted by the parties and the international community. It is doing this willfully by its policy of expanding settlements, demolitions and incitement, accompanied by the refusal to engage in a meaningful dialogue to implement the internationally agreed two state solutions.

Unless the Israeli Government agrees to resume the implementation of the two state solution, and halts and reverses its policy of expanding settlements, the UN Security Council must... adopt a concrete and legally binding plan to implement the two state solutions and take the necessary measures for its enforcement.<sup>142</sup>

In an exceptional incident in late 2016, which almost drove the region into a new state of tension between Pakistan and Israel, Minister of Defence Khawaja Asif responded to a fake story that stated, “If Pakistan send ground troops to Syria on any pretext, we will destroy this country with a nuclear attack.” Asif replied, “Israel forgets Pakistan is a nuclear state too.”<sup>143</sup>

President ‘Abbas paid a three-day visit to Pakistan in January 2017. The visit aimed to mobilize Pakistani support in international forums and to advance the peace process. During a joint press conference with President ‘Abbas, Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif said, “Ensuring peace in the Middle East can’t be achieved without just settlement of the Palestine-Israeli dispute.” The Prime Minister called for the implementation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions and called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Fifth: Responsiveness of the Muslim Public to the Palestine Issue***

Events in Jerusalem in 2016–2017, especially after the closure of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017, and following Trump’s declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on 6/12/2017, and the decision to transfer the US embassy to it, have returned the Palestine issue to the center of the Muslim world’s attention. The Muslim public rejected Israeli actions against the Palestinians; huge demonstrations were held in most Muslim countries, reaching one million participants in some countries, calling for the expulsion of Israel’s ambassadors from some states, the end of all forms of normalization with Israel, and boycotting the US. Islamic parties and unions played an important role in mobilizing the public through organizing demonstrations, sit-ins, festivals, and popular events.

Turkey was one of the main countries which reacted on the popular level to every major Palestinian event. Turkish people provided financial and in-kind support to the Gazans and supported the Jerusalemites with the essentials to withstand Israeli Judaisation attempts. They were also keen to host and organize Palestinian events...

Humanitarian assistance, collected by Turkish organizations and associations and provided to the besieged in GS, frequently arrived in 2016–2017.<sup>145</sup> In Jerusalem, Turkish associations contributed to the restoration of historic mosques and old houses, as well as cleaning Ottoman relics and organizing many guided tours of the holy city. In addition, the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs was held in Istanbul for the purpose of establishing an investment endowment (waqf) for the city. The Waqf Al-Ummah in Turkey launched the “Two Steps to Jerusalem” charity

campaign to attract contributors and donors to finance Jerusalem endowments in various ways.<sup>146</sup> Turks also hosted, and contributed to the organization of, numerous conferences in support of Palestinian issues, notably: The Palestinians of Turkey Conference was held on 4/9/2016, with the participation of 25 Palestinian institutions operating in Turkey, the establishment of the International Forum for Palestinian Engineers on 5/11/2016, the Parliamentarians for Al-Quds conference on 29–30/11/2016, the third conference of the General Assembly of the Palestine Scholars Association in the Diaspora on 3/2/2017, and the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad on 25–26/2/2017. In addition, the International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS) launched a global advocacy campaign in Istanbul on 6/11/2017 in support of Sheikh Raed Salah, who was detained in Israeli jail. They also announced the “Nation’s Scholars Charter of the Resistance to Normalization with the Zionist Entity,” which was signed on 18/12/2017 in Istanbul.<sup>147</sup>

Turks also took part in mass demonstrations against Israeli attacks on Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, where they organized many events in rejection of the Israeli decision to ban the *adhan* in occupied Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Several Turkish cities witnessed mass demonstrations in protest against the closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017. Trump’s embassy transfer announcement to Jerusalem triggered a wave of Turkish condemnation and concern, as well as angry popular reaction, with Turkey declaring its rejection of the announcement and demanding the US withdraw it. Demonstrations, organized and coordinated by hundreds of associations and parties, witnessed the participation of high-profile figures, in addition to Arab communities residing in Turkey, and students from Turkish schools and universities. Events denouncing Trump’s announcement were organized in most Turkish cities; for example, the number of assemblies and demonstrations reached 132 in 81 states on 8/12/2017 only. Turkish community associations and civil institutions also organized a number of activities and events, whose proceeds were donated to Jerusalem.<sup>148</sup>

In Iran, International Jerusalem Day rallies took place again in 2016–2017, on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan, in support of the Palestine issue, with the participation of millions of Iranians in all Iranian provinces. In July 2017, thousands of Iranians took part in rallies in support of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, condemning the Israeli closure of the mosque before worshippers, and the installation of metal detectors at its entrances. The popular mobilization was repeated following

Trump's embassy transfer announcement, as mass demonstrations were held in Tehran and most Iranian provinces condemning the move. Tehran also witnessed many events in solidarity with the Palestinian people and a number of conferences were held in support of the Palestine issue.<sup>149</sup>

The Malaysian people's interaction with the Palestine issue was notable in 2016 and 2017; solidarity events were organized to condemn Israeli violations and US bias towards Israel. In addition, the boycott of Israeli goods was reactivated, and Israeli products were removed from a number of commercial centres. Malaysian popular movement in solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners' strike during the months of April and May 2017 was remarkable; many events rejecting violations by the Israel Prison Service against the prisoners were organized.<sup>150</sup> Trump's declaration on Jerusalem sparked a wave of angry Malaysian popular denunciation, Malaysian cities witnessed hundreds of protests rejecting the declaration and demanding the US withdraw it. Demonstrations were led by prominent officials, including Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and a number of ministers and parliamentarians.

In the same context, Indonesians expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people and with their just causes, declaring their rejection of Israeli attacks on the Palestinian people. They organized many events in solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners' strike in 2017, condemning the arbitrary arrests by the Israeli authorities against the Palestinians. Thousands of Indonesians also took to the streets in support of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in July 2017, led by many officials, religious figures, and politicians. Several religious figures and civil society organizations distributed circulars to all the mosques in the country stating that Friday Khutbahs (sermons) should be about supporting and defending the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and about spreading awareness of the Palestine issue.<sup>151</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians protested against Trump's declaration; at the invitation of the Indonesian Scholars Council, "Majelis Ulama Indonesia," hundreds of thousands of Indonesians gathered in Merdeka Square located in the centre of the capital Jakarta to protest against Trump's decision under the slogan "Indonesia Unites for Jerusalem." Popular figures and officials, including Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly, Zulkifli Hasan, the parliament speaker and his deputy, and the governor of the capital Jakarta. The Islam-based Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*—PKS), which participated

with other parties in organizing the demonstration in Jakarta, condemned Trump's declaration, stressing that it showed enmity towards Muslims throughout the world.<sup>152</sup>

Thousands gathered in several Pakistani cities, notably the capital Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar, to condemn Trump's declaration on Jerusalem. Chairman of the All Pakistan Ulema Council, Hafiz Muhammad Ashrafi criticised Trump's announcement about the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, saying that that was a transgression against the entire Muslim world. A number of Pakistani parties announced their rejection of the declaration, saying that it was a blatant provocation to the feelings of the Muslim *Ummah*. They called on other parties to boycott US products and stop mutual visits with the United States, calling for an international conference on the issue of Jerusalem.<sup>153</sup>

Many Islamic organizations condemned the July 2017 Israeli closure of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. On 15/7/2017, the IUMS described the closure as "criminal" and "dangerous." The International Muslim Women's Union, headquartered in Khartoum, also condemned the closure. IUMS stressed that Jerusalem was a red line, and that considering it the Israeli capital was a blatant attack on Muslims, a disregard for their sanctities, and great support to extremism. IUMS Chairman Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi emphasized that cession of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque or Jerusalem was not a simple, marginal matter; "Whomever issued the decision, it cannot be permitted."<sup>154</sup>

The most prominent Islamic events in solidarity with the Palestine issue were:

- The call by scholars and clerics from 14 African countries for "mass mobilization" in support of Jerusalem and Palestine, and "to counter any Israeli attempts to infiltrate" the African continent. At the closing session of the "The Second Meeting of Jerusalem" held in the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott on 13/11/2016. They stressed the need to confront "normalization with Israel," and the need to "restore solidarity among the African peoples, and unite them to support just causes, especially the Palestine issue."<sup>155</sup>
- The Islamic-Christian Dialogue Conference, on 1/7/2017, called for the support of the people in Jerusalem, as well as supporting civil and official educational, cultural, economic, social, and health institutions in Jerusalem, to strengthen the steadfastness of its people and institutions.<sup>156</sup>

- Declaration of Jerusalem as the “al-Quds–OIC Youth Capital 2018,” at the conclusion of the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation (ICYF-DC) meetings in Istanbul on 25/7/2017.<sup>157</sup>
- 300 Muslim scholars, on 12/12/2017, belonging to a number of institutions and unions, gathered, including: The Palestine Scholars Association in the Diaspora, Sunni Scholars League, The Syrian Islamic Council, Iraqi Fiqh Academy, The Council of Iraqi Scholars, The Association of Libyan Scholars, Sunni Scholars League in Turkey, and The Association of Muslim Scholars of Australia. They called on Muslims to enforce the boycott of US and Israeli goods, and boycott any state involved in the aggression against Jerusalem.<sup>158</sup>
- Muslim scholars from several countries declared, on 18/12/2017, the adoption of the “Nation’s Scholars Charter to Resist Normalization with the Zionist Entity” at all levels: political, economic, social, and cultural. At a conference held in Istanbul, the scholars said that the launch of the charter was aimed at curbing the growing wave of normalization with Israel in the Muslim world. The charter was signed by 36 bodies and associations, and more than 300 scholars from 26 countries. It consisted of 44 articles, introducing Sharia ruling on normalization, considering it prohibited by Sharia law, and providing explanation for the evidence of its prohibition and its purposes, in addition to mentioning the consequences of “the degrading factors,” as stated in the charter.<sup>159</sup>

### ***Sixth: Normalization and Israeli Relations with Muslim Countries***

Israel continues to make huge efforts to normalize relations with Muslim countries, taking advantage of weakness and fragility among Arabs and Muslims, and making use of the rise in US support of Israel, presenting relations with it as a gateway to improved and developed relations with the US. Israeli official statements reflected some progress in this process. Israeli officials have been keen to make statements and send messages to indicate the importance and symbolism of Israel being able to overcome the tactic of boycott.

In this context, Israeli Minister of Energy, Yuval Steinitz, revealed on 19/11/2017 that Israel has “ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab

countries.” When asked about the reason for concealing or denying these relations, Steinitz said, “It’s the other side that is interested in keeping the ties quiet. With us, usually, there is no problem, but we respect the other side’s wish,” adding, “ties are developing, whether it’s with Saudi Arabia or with other Arab countries or other Muslim countries, and there is much more... (but) we keep it secret.”<sup>160</sup>

On 27/11/2017, Representative of Israel to the UN, Danny Danon, revealed that he was “holding covert contacts with ambassadors from 12 Islamic and Arab countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.” Danon described the contrast between the past and the present, saying that most of the ambassadors would once have done anything to avoid having any contact with Israel. Now, he said, they shake hands and their encounters are cordial and, at times warm. Danon explained, “They still do not vote with us, but I can say that we have relationships with them on a mutual basis,” adding, “We were once banned from every discussion and event held by the ambassadors of these countries, but today we cooperate with them on a weekly basis. My challenge is for these collaborations to come out of the closed rooms and go public.”<sup>161</sup>

Israel’s relations have remarkably developed with two Asian Muslim States, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, in Central Asia. In December 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited these two countries. Israel has economic ties with them, as Azerbaijan has been buying weapons over several years from Israel, while the latter “buys nearly 70% of its oil consumption from the two countries.”<sup>162</sup> Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, announced, on 13/12/2016, during a meeting with Netanyahu, that Azerbaijan had signed long-term contracts for the purchase of defense equipment from Israel at a value of \$5 billion. Aliyev noted this in his speech, saying, “Trade turnover is at the good level, but mainly because of the oil supplies from Azerbaijan to Israel,” adding, “We need to work in order to diversify and increase it.” The two sides signed four economic cooperation agreements.<sup>163</sup>

In 2016–2017, relations developed between Israel and a number of Muslim States in Africa, including: Mali, Chad, Niger, Guinea, Uganda, and Togo. Israeli Foreign Ministry Director-General Dore Gold, who took office from June 2015 until October 2016, is considered the architect of Israel’s foreign relations, especially with regard to African-Israeli relations. Gold strengthened diplomatic relations with many Muslim States in Africa, making public visits to some of them,

as well as secret visits to others. Some of these relations were kept secret, perhaps due to these states' fear of internal and external reactions.<sup>164</sup>

In this context, a landmark Israeli-African summit, which “was meant to bring 54 countries on the continent to the Togolese capital of Lome,” on 23–27/10/2017, was cancelled due to internal and external pressure against this summit, which reflected the level of Israeli infiltration into Africa. At the same time, it reflected the power of the public when it opposes normalization, and its ability to embarrass many regimes that seek to do so.<sup>165</sup>

In terms of trade between the Muslim world and Israel, the volume between Turkey and Israel, according to CBS, increased by almost 10.5% in 2017 compared to 2016. In 2016, there was a decline in the volume of Turkish-Israeli trade by more than –6% compared to 2015.

Israel's trade with Malaysia dropped significantly in 2017 by –96.4% compared to 2016. It also dropped in 2016 by –58.4% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Nigeria increased in 2017 by 79.2% compared to 2016. It dropped in 2016 by –27% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan dropped in 2017 by –23.4% compared to 2016. It increased in 2016 by 101.6% compared to 2015. It increased in 2016 by 101.6% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Kazakhstan dropped in 2017 by –23.9% compared to 2016. It dropped in 2016 by –20.7% compared to 2015. Israeli trade with Indonesia dropped in 2017 by –19.8% compared to 2016. It increased in 2016 by 11% compared to 2015 (see table 3/7).

Israeli trade with Muslim countries remains, to a large extent, limited and marginal, except for Turkey, a country that distinguishes between its pro-Palestine political relations and its active trade with Israel. This is because most Muslim countries do not have official relations with Israel, and to the animosity of their people towards Israel. As for Malaysia, whose trade with Israel steeply declined in 2016–2017, it does not have any official relations with Israel. A considerable part of the announced Israeli trade may be due to that fact that American companies have branches in both countries, thus sending goods from Israel to Malaysia; an analysis that needs to be confirmed. Perhaps the Malaysian authorities have been aware of this in the last two years and have clamped down on this type of trade; or any direct or indirect trade to which the Israeli side is a party of.

**Table 3/7: Israeli Trade Volume with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2014–2017 (\$ millions)<sup>166</sup>**

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2017	2016	2015	2014	2017	2016	2015	2014
<b>Turkey</b>	1,414.2	1,297.7	1,713.6	2,755.6	2,895.9	2,601.7	2,446	2,683.6
<b>Malaysia</b>	6.9	583.3	1,419.5	1,375.7	14.6	14	15.3	52
<b>Nigeria</b>	148.6	81.7	113.2	96.9	3.4	3.1	2.9	1.4
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	199.8	260.1	129.7	185	4.3	6.2	2.4	1.1
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	31.1	46.5	59.7	114.3	5.9	2.1	1.6	3.9
<b>Senegal</b>	12	7.1	14.7	14	4.4	4.9	4.7	2.9
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	17.2	13.3	15.3	38.2	2.4	0.3	1.2	1.2
<b>Indonesia</b>	83.3	120.9	95.5	27.1	48.4	43.3	52.2	68.7
<b>Cote d'Ivoire</b>	9.7	10.7	9.8	19.3	0.3	0.2	0.4	1.1
<b>Cameron</b>	5.3	8.8	8.5	6.8	0	0.2	0	0.1
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	4.4	2	22.7	7.8	0.1	0	0	0
<b>Gabon</b>	0.6	5.1	4.5	4	0.1	0.3	0	0

## ***Conclusion***

The Muslims of the world, in general, interacted and were in consensus regarding the Lion's Gate uprising (*Habbat al-Asbat*) and the protests against Trump's embassy transfer announcement to Jerusalem. All over the Muslim world, thousands rallied and protested the Trump decision. Pro-Palestine and anti-Israeli occupation sentiments were obvious and powerful, however they were emotional reactions and lacked sustainability. This was mainly due to Muslim governments not providing adequate media coverage, and the Palestine issue easily loses their political attention, hence weakening the chances of permanent interaction with Palestine.

Muslim officials continued their traditional policies in adopting the Arab Peace Initiative and the “two-state solution,” and in supporting the PLO leadership. Their official relations with Israel are still severed, despite some countries, which continued or developed their trade—though limited—with it.

Turkey, led by AKP, continued its strong pro-Palestine policy and defense of Hamas’s right to participation in political leadership, while harshly criticizing hostile Israeli conduct. However, Turkish trade with Israel was very active, significantly more than any other Muslim country, thus distinguishing between the political and economic tracks. Turkey took into consideration its NATO membership criteria, its desire for EU membership, and the wish not to further strain its relationship with Israel, which may support its political opponents at home or on the Turkish border. It seems that the Turkish behavior will continue to maintain its overall pattern over the next couple of years.

As for Iran, it continued its anti-Israel existence and pro-armed resistance policies, adopted since the 1979 Iranian revolution that ousted the Shah. Despite its stumbling and cold relations with the most prominent resistance force, Hamas, due to its regional policies, this relationship recovered substantially, especially in 2017. At the same time, Israel escalated its warnings against an increased Iranian-Hizbullah influence in Lebanon and Syria, dealing with it as a potential threat, despite its comfort with the regional internal and sectarian conflicts, which negatively affect these countries’ social fabric, economic structure and political system. Israel wants the conflict to continue, provided it does not affect its security, stability and the calm along its borders. Iran is expected to preserve its anti-Israel pro-Palestinian armed resistance policies, and tension may rise with the increased Iranian-Hizbullah influence in Lebanon and Syria.

## Endnotes

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## This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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Edited By

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Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

# Chapter Eight

## *The Palestine Issue and the International Situation*



# **The Palestine Issue and the International Situation**

## ***Introduction***

While the international environment was busy with a number of hot regional and international issues in 2016–2017, including developments in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Ukraine, attention on the Palestine issue fell back from the forefront of the scene, except for brief periods of time linked to the Jerusalem *Intifadah* and the Lion's Gate uprising. Generally, the Palestine issue was “marginalized,” as confirmed by a number of officials representing international powers; these will be mentioned later in this report. It is sufficient here to point out that the presidential and ministerial statements of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (which was established in 2001, and includes eight countries: Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, with their combined population being approximately 50% of the world's population, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about 25% of the Gross World Product (GWP), and with an area of nearly 80% of Eurasia) were entirely devoid of the Palestine issue, while other Middle Eastern matters were prominent in these statements in 2016–2017.<sup>1</sup>

International and regional dynamics have overwhelmed the Palestine issue, with their subjects overlapping in a manner which makes it difficult to separate them, on the one hand, and makes it hard to avoid their negative impact on the centrality of the Palestine issue in the Arab and Islamic environment, hence on the international environment, on the other hand.

## ***First: The International Environment and the Palestine Issue***

It is difficult, considering the increasing interdependence of international entities, to separate the mutual impacts between one aspect and another, regardless of proximity or geographic dimension. The international and regional arenas

witnessed mutual-impact dynamics in 2016–2017, and this had an impact on the Palestine issue, as evident in the following dynamics:

### **1. Regional Dynamics and Their International Implications**

a. Continuation of the severe political instability in the Arab region, and international diplomacy's preoccupation with it. It suffices to point out that during 2016–2017, five Arab countries were among the top 10 most politically unstable countries in the world.<sup>2</sup>

This Arab political turmoil led to the backlash of Arab policies against their internal situation, which reduced the level of interest in the Palestine issue on the international stage, both in the diplomatic and economic activities of Arab countries (especially in support of the Palestinian people).

b. Building Arab international alliances (the US coalition and Russian coalition) to counter what is known as “terrorist organizations,” especially ISIS. This resulted in the emergence of Arab and international trends (especially among US-affiliated alliances) to include the Palestinian resistance organizations on the list of “terrorist organizations.” This had a profound negative impact on the political status and legal legitimacy of the Palestinian resistance movement, particularly considering the continued Palestinian resistance, especially what was dubbed the “Knives’ *Intifadah*,” i.e., the confrontations with Israel, as Israel attempted to control the gates of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque throughout 2017.

c. The pursuit of some Arab countries, with the support of the US, to divert Arab efforts from confronting Israel to confronting Iran, despite the victory of the reformist movement in the Iranian presidential elections in May 2017.

This Arab trend gave rise to Arab regional crises—such as the Gulf crisis—which diverted international efforts to resolving such crises, in a manner that had a negative impact on the Palestine issue, not to mention the increased emergence of diplomatic Arab-Israeli relations which moved toward normalization with Israel, and that further restricted the Palestinian political scope of work within the international framework.

d. Decline in oil prices in international markets starting February 2016 (with the price per barrel hitting a low); the price remained low until the end of 2017. This led to a decline in the Arab countries' income generated from this sector by about 50%, which would later affect Arab aid to the Palestinians, not to mention the probability

that this economic situation could further spread political instability across Arab regions which had previously survived it, and that deepened the negative effects on the Palestine issue. Perhaps the oil price decline had the biggest impact on international dynamics,<sup>3</sup> leading to negative repercussions on the Palestine issue at the international level.

## 2. The International Dimension

The international scene witnessed a number of variables that diverted attention from the Palestine issue to a large extent. Some of these variables represented periodic changes, some of which were unexpected, as was the case with the following:

a. The “unexpected” transition from a Democratic presidency in the US (Barack Obama) to a Republican administration led by President Donald Trump, characterized by a lack of stability and his involvement in internal conflicts which revolve around numerous accusations made against him, coupled with his unclear policy toward the Palestine issue, as evidenced by the discrepancies between his campaign pledges and his actions after taking office.

b. Centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron winning the French presidency in May 2017; a victory which caused a profound change in the structure of the traditional French political elite (*Le Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicains*). There is no doubt that this development requires Palestinian diplomacy to study and reflect on how to deal with a significant change in a major European state.

c. Britain’s announcement of its exit from the European Union (EU) in June 2016, not to mention the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron and replacement with Home Secretary Theresa May. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom (UK) exiting the European Union will affect the European Union’s attitude toward the Palestine issue, especially as Britain was one of the “counter-tension” forces, more in tune with American and Israeli policies than other European countries. This could make the Palestinian diplomacy’s job of dealing with the EU less difficult.

d. Continued “terrorist operations” in 2016–2017 in a number of European and Asian countries, as well as the US, and holding “Islamic” movements responsible for these operations, which affected international public opinion’s attitude toward Arab and Islamic matters, including the Palestine issue.

e. Continued diplomatic tension over North Korea's missile and nuclear tests contributed to the abandonment, on the part of major powers in particular, of other issues, in an attempt to contain the risks of this crisis, which got so far as the US and North Korea exchanging nuclear threats.

This international environment, which we have briefly outlined the general features of, suggests a less favourable climate for Palestinian political action. To realize this negative impact, it is sufficient to consider—as we'll explain later in this report—the number of diplomatic activities related to the Palestine issue at the UN, EU, or the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), as well as the joint statements of most internationally influential states, in addition to media coverage and international conferences. It is enough to point out—as we will explain—that the former UN Secretary-General had warned that the UN Security Council, throughout the tenure of Ban Ki-moon (10 years), only made two decisions regarding the conflict in the Middle East.

In general, there are two crucial factors to the discussion of the Palestine issue internationally:

- a. Activity aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement.
- b. Activity resulting from the Palestinian resistance and *Intifadah*.

Both factors have varying and overlapping effects, noting that international intervention does not necessarily mean support for the Palestinian question, because US and Western intervention often favours and supports Israel, providing a cover for it, and extricating it from its predicaments.

### ***Second: Quartet on the Middle East (UN, EU, US, Russian Federation)***

Perhaps the nonchalant attitude of the Quartet toward their role, evident from the extent of their diplomatic activity compared to the number of their meetings and statements issued, has been a noticeable feature since the beginning of this Quartet's work in 2002. Indeed, the contradictory statements found in its annual report have repeated a number of attitudes that are approved by the international community in general, opting out of any action-based approach. Its effectiveness seems to have been mainly linked to an attempt to calm and contain the Palestinian

situation and put it under control, as well as to free Israel from the responsibilities incurred by its occupation. Below is a summary of its statements in 2016–2017:<sup>4</sup>

1. Statement of the Munich meeting on 12/2/2016: The statement indicated that political trends were imperilling the viability of the two-state solution. The Quartet pledged to offer recommendations to advance the two-state solution, emphasizing the following:

- a. Condemning all acts of “terrorism” and condemning violence against civilians, calling on all parties to cease incitement and work to reduce tension.
- b. Emphasising that violence against civilians, the high rate of demolition of Palestinian homes, and the continuation of settlement construction constituted a serious impediment to reaching a two-state solution, and that unilateral actions by either party to the conflict seriously jeopardized the two-state solution. Emphasising the Quartet’s commitment to reaching a solution based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).
- c. The Quartet affirmed the need to support the Palestinian economy and strengthen governance as essential tools for building a Palestinian state and achieving Palestinian unity between WB and GS under a single, democratic and legitimate PA based on the PLO platform and Quartet principles.
- d. The Quartet stressed the need to pay attention to the dire humanitarian situation in GS, and to look at the facilitation of passage to Gaza, in addition to urging the international community to honour its pledges to provide the funds approved at the Cairo Conference in October 2014.

2. The Quartet, in a statement on 1/7/2016, made a number of recommendations for the achievement of the two-state solution, which they had referred to in their February 2016 statement, as seen in the following:

- a. The two parties to the conflict should de-escalate tensions and refrain from provocative actions and rhetoric.
- b. The PA should do everything in its power to prevent incitement to violence and to strengthen “counter-terrorism” measures, including the condemnation of such acts.
- c. The Israeli government must cease: all settlement activity, whether construction or expansion; the allocation of Palestinian territory for Israeli purposes; and the obstruction of Palestinian development.

- d. Israel should begin positive and important transitional steps, including the transfer of powers and responsibilities in Area C, in a manner consistent with a broader level of Palestinian civil authority powers established in previous agreements. All of this should be accomplished alongside development in water, electricity, roads, communications, energy, agriculture, and natural resources. Also, restrictions on the movement of Palestinians should be eased, while the requirements of Israeli security continued to be respected.
- e. The PA should continue its efforts to strengthen governance and economic development, and Israel should take all measures to facilitate that, in line with the recommendations of the Quartet.
- f. All parties must respect the cease-fire in Gaza and the need to end armament and armed activity.

3. Statement of the New York meeting on 23/9/2016: The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both France and Egypt participated in the meeting. The statement called for:

- a. The implementation of the Quartet's recommendations which were stated in its report issued on 1/7/2016.
- b. The resumption of negotiations to lead to the ending of the occupation in place since 1967, and the resolution of all final status issues.
- c. Reiteration of the committee's opposition to settlement activity and to measures eroding the viability of the two-state solution.
- d. Reiteration of the need to address the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, while noting the dangers of continued arms build-up by Palestinian militant groups in a manner which might lead to new rounds of conflict.
- e. Avoiding all actions that could lead to the escalation of violence.

4. The Jerusalem meeting on 13/7/2017, which was the Quartet's first meeting after the new US President, Donald Trump, took office. The Quartet's envoys reflected on the efforts aiming to advance the political settlement, while also examining the deterioration of the GS humanitarian situation. The Quartet called on all parties to exercise restraint with regard to the Jerusalem incidents, and to refrain from action which could further complicate matters.

The Quartet's statements and recommendations, when considering their general implications, indicate three aspects:

- a. Creating conditions that tighten the screws on the prospects of growing Palestinian resistance, and insisting on linking it with the “terrorism” phenomenon, in line with the world’s preoccupation with the listing of organizations that can be described as “terrorist.”
- b. Promoting everything necessary to strengthen the powers of the PA and enhance its authority to implement its WB policies in GS, as reflected in the text of Article 9 of the Quartet’s report (February 2016), which reads that the PA should “control... all armed personnel and weapons in accordance with existing agreements.”
- c. Being consistent with the international community’s attitude calling for Israel to end settlement expansion without identifying any specific actions or punitive measures in case of Israel’s non-compliance with this request.

### ***Third: The United Nations and Intergovernmental Organizations***

UN efforts are made through the activities of the Secretary-General, the Security Council, and the General Assembly, along with other specialised agencies within the UN. During 2016–2017, it witnessed a change in its Secretary-General position (in January 2017, when António Guterres replaced Ban Ki-moon, whose term expired in December 2016).

#### **1. UN Secretariat**

The report submitted by Ban Ki-Moon to the UN Security Council in December 2016, and the report submitted in September 2016, can be considered as a summary of his assessment of the Arab-Israeli conflict after his 10 years of service at the UN. These reports include the following points:<sup>5</sup>

- a. Ban Ki-moon stressed that his assessment of the situation brings no sense of optimism for the future of the Palestine issue.
- b. Ban Ki-moon believes that although the Palestine issue is not the cause of the wars in the Middle East, its resolution can create momentum for peace throughout the region.
- c. The Secretary-General pointed out that UN Resolution 181 of 1947 provided for the emergence of “independent Arab and Jewish States.” In 1948, the State

of Israel was born. Almost seven decades later, the world still awaits the birth of the Palestinian State.

- d. He stressed that the conviction among the parties to the conflict of the two-state solution was initially strong but then started to wane, pointing out that Israelis living in settlements in the WB, including East Jerusalem, increased by 30% over the past decade, emphasising the existence of Israeli forces that call for the full annexation of WB, not to mention the continued Palestinian division, and continuing Israeli apprehension about ongoing incitement to “terrorism.”
- e. Ban Ki-moon stated that rounds of conflict continued after the announcement of the Arab peace initiative, which weakened optimism for an early solution, referring to the wars in 2006 and 2008, focusing on the tragic consequences of the 2014 war on GS.
- f. Ban Ki-moon warned of an important point: that the Security Council adopted only two resolutions on the Middle East peace process throughout the period from 2007 to early 2017. The time difference between the two resolutions was approximately eight years.
- g. To get out of this impasse, Ban Ki-moon believes that the solution is to implement the recommendations of the Quartet (which we mentioned earlier). However, settlement and the “regularization” decisions made by Israel at the beginning of 2016 (regarding 50 outposts and thousands of housing units in WB) threaten—from the Secretary-General’s point of view—the capacity to implement the recommendations.
- h. Ban Ki-moon called on the PA to work harder to stop incitement and the various acts of “violence.”
- i. He called on all parties (Israel, PA, and Hamas) to respect human rights defenders and freedom of expression, and to refrain from administrative detention.
- j. He called on Palestinians to unite and establish a single, legitimate, inclusive Palestinian Government, based on the PLO principles.

The new Secretary-General, Guterres, reiterated the traditional UN position during his PA visit in August 2017. He emphasized the two-state solution, and that Israeli settlement activities are an obstacle to achieving this goal, as well as reiterating the need to help resolve the GS humanitarian crisis, which he described, during his visit to the city, as “one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises that I have seen in many years working as a humanitarian in the United Nations.”<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Security Council

Resolution 2334 issued on 23/12/2016, concerning Israeli settlement activities, confirmed the international trend toward opposing settlement expansion, especially with the US abstaining from using veto against the resolution, and with the other 14 States supporting the resolution. The Israeli government considered the resolution to be shocking and subsequently recalled their ambassadors from both New Zealand and Senegal. Israel also cancelled a visit planned by the Prime Minister of Ukraine to Israel, and David Keyes, spokesperson for the Israeli Prime Minister, accused the Obama administration and stated that “This was a deliberate push by the United States and in fact they helped create the resolution in the first place.” In addition to that, the Israeli government, in the first week of January 2017, cut their UN annual dues, which amounted to \$6 million.<sup>7</sup>

The resolution provided for the following:<sup>8</sup>

- a. “The establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-State solution.”
- b. A demand that Israel cease all settlement activities, including in East Jerusalem.
- c. Non-recognition of any changes to the 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem.
- d. Calling upon all States to “distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.”

## 3. General Assembly

The 71st session of the UN General Assembly, held on 13–23/12/2016, adopted a number of resolutions on the Palestine issue, set out below:<sup>9</sup>

- a. The Assembly reaffirmed that Palestinian refugees are entitled to their property and to the income derived therefrom, in conformity with the principles of equity and justice.
- b. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General take all suitable steps, in consultation with the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), to protect Arab property, assets and property rights in Israel.

- c. The Assembly called once again upon Israel to render all facilities and assistance to the Secretary-General in the implementation of the present resolution.
- d. The Assembly called upon all the parties concerned to provide the Secretary-General with any pertinent information in their possession concerning Arab property, assets and property rights in Israel that would assist him in the implementation of the present resolution.

The Assembly's resolutions at this session also included:

- a. The Assembly affirmed the necessity for the continuation of the work of UNRWA, stressing that Israel must facilitate the Agency's work and the movement of its employees, underlining the financial difficulties experienced by the Agency.
- b. The Assembly noted with regret that the UNCCP had been unable to find a means of achieving progress in the implementation of Paragraph 11 of General Assembly Resolution 194. It reiterated its request to the UNCCP to continue exerting efforts toward the implementation of assistance to the Palestinian refugees and to report to the Assembly on the efforts being exerted in this regard as appropriate, but no later than 1/9/2017.
- c. The Assembly reaffirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and of the population of the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources, including land, water and energy. It demanded that Israel, the occupying Power, cease the exploitation, damage, cause of loss or depletion and endangerment of the natural resources in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (territories occupied in 1967),<sup>10</sup> including East Jerusalem, and in the occupied Syrian Golan.
- d. The Assembly recognized the right of the Palestinian people to claim restitution as a result of any exploitation, damage, loss or depletion or endangerment of their natural resources resulting from illegal measures taken by Israel, the occupying power, and Israeli settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. It expressed the hope that this issue would be dealt with within the framework of the final status negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides.
- e. The Assembly considered the work of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories and demanded that Israel provide

the Committee with all necessary facilities. They also pointed out the Israeli violations of Palestinian rights in the occupied territories, including Jerusalem.

- f. The Assembly emphasized the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination; that Israeli practices harm Palestinian human rights in the occupied territories; and that the settlements are illegal, including those in East Jerusalem.

When calculating the level of support for the 16 paragraphs voted in favour of the Palestinian cause at the said session, the voting results were as follows:

- a. The rate of support was 140 votes out of 193, the total number of member States; the rate of support for Palestinian rights was 72.53%.
- b. It had the highest level of support in the General Assembly's vote for the resolution on Palestinians' right to self-determination, receiving 177 votes (91.7%). The least supported resolution was the one related to the formation of a committee to investigate Israeli violations affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the occupied territories, receiving 91 votes (47.15%).

#### **4. United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC)**

The HRC comprises 47 members elected by the UN General Assembly, representing the world's political regions. During the March 2016 meetings, the Council took the following positions:<sup>11</sup>

- a. Affirmed the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.
- b. Reviewed all Israeli violations of human rights in the territories occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem.
- c. The Council called upon all responsible bodies and UN agencies to continue to implement the recommendations contained in the reports of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict and the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate the Implications of the Israeli Settlements on the Civil, Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of the Palestinian People Throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 1967, Including East Jerusalem.
- d. The Assembly approved the proposal of establishing a database of all international and Israeli business enterprises whose activities are linked to

the illegal Jewish settlements in the territories occupied in 1967. A number of researchers linked this decision to the ICC's announcement that they would start focusing on crimes linked to the exploitation of natural resources and unlawful dispossession of land.

The 34th session of the Assembly, held between 27/2–24/3/2017, reiterated the call for accountability and determination of responsibility for the violations of Palestinian human rights in the occupied territories in 1967, including East Jerusalem, and reiterated the right of Palestinian people to self-determination and the illegality of settlement activities.

### **5. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

The UNESCO represents the UN scientific, intellectual, and literary dimensions, and Israel views this body with antipathy in the light of the majority of the UNESCO positions on the Palestine issue. In line with the prevailing approach in this organization, UNESCO took a number of positions throughout 2016–2017, outlined below:<sup>12</sup>

- a. In its October 2016 motion, UNESCO condemned Israeli measures taking place around the *al-Aqsa* Mosque such as excavations and restrictions on worshippers entering the mosque.
- b. At the meeting held between 4–18/10/2016, the UNESCO stressed:
  1. It deeply regrets Israel's refusal to implement previous resolutions.
  2. It deeply regrets the persistence of Israeli excavations in Jerusalem.
  3. They called on Israel to work to restore the pre-2000 status quo with regard to Jordan's mandate to supervise the holy places.
  4. They reject Israeli violations of the rights of Palestinian clerics and the restrictions imposed on *al-Aqsa* Mosque entry.
  5. They condemn the destruction which affected the walls of Jerusalem.

In 2017, UNESCO held a meeting during the period 19/4–5/5/2017, in which they criticized Israeli actions regarding the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron and the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque/ Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, since they fall within the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.

In July 2017, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee passed a resolution labelling Israel as “the occupying Power, which have altered or purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem,” which was rejected by Israel and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

In a statement issued by the US State Department in October 2017, the United States described UNESCO’s position as “anti-Israel bias” and said that the organization needed “reform.” This led a decision to withdraw from UNESCO—which will take effect on 31/12/2018—at the same time, Netanyahu called on the relevant Israeli parties to work to withdraw from the organization. It is known that the US has not pay its dues to UNESCO since 2011, because of what it considers bias against Israel, after UNESCO granted membership to Palestine, and this was the second time the US had withdrawn from UNESCO, having previously withdrawn in 1984 under Ronald Reagan, for “what it considered an ideological tilt toward the Soviet Union against the West”; however, they rejoined in 2002 under George W. Bush.<sup>14</sup>

## **6. United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**

At two meetings held during 2016 (2 June and 25 July), ECOSOC condemned a number of Israeli policies, including:<sup>15</sup>

- a. Israeli settler violence toward Palestinian women.
- b. Excessive Israeli use of force and violent action against civilians in GS.
- c. The Commission affirmed the poor economic and humanitarian conditions in GS and considered the occupation to be the primary cause of all these conditions.
- d. The Commission called upon the international community to fulfil its commitments to the Palestinian people.
- e. The Commission demanded the opening of all GS borders and crossings in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1860 (2009).
- f. The Commission affirmed the contiguity and unity of the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories and demanded that Israel respect the agreement signed with the PA in 1994 regarding the economic relations between the two parties.

## **7. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)**

In September 2016, the UNCTAD published a detailed report on the impact of Israeli policies on the Palestinian economy. After reviewing the various production

sectors in relation to the overall tendency of the Palestinian economy during the period 1975–2014, the report concluded:

- a. The contribution of the tradable goods sector (agriculture and industry) to GDP dropped by more than 50%, from 37% to 18%.
- b. The contribution to employment decreased from 47% to 23%.
- c. The Palestinian economy was deprived of the benefits derived from Area C, i.e., access to more than 60% of WB and approximately 66% of grazing land.
- d. In GS, 85% of fishery resources are inaccessible to Palestinian producers.
- e. Israeli military operations against GS (2008–2014) had incurred a cost at least three times the size of GS's GDP.
- f. More than 2.5 million productive trees have been uprooted since 1967, including 800 thousand olive trees, 5,600 of which were vandalized in 2015.
- g. 82% of the Palestinian groundwater resources have been confiscated in the 1967 occupied territories.
- h. Palestinians must import 50% of their water needs from Israel.
- i. 66% of Palestinians in the WB and GS suffer chronic food insecurity.
- j. 73% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip need humanitarian assistance.
- k. Health status in Gaza:
  1. Up to 90 million litres of partially treated sewage is discharged daily into GS's Mediterranean Sea.
  2. Waiting time for some surgeries can be 18 months.
  3. More than 70% of households are supplied with piped water for only 6–8 hours every 2–4 days.
  4. The rate of neonatal mortality has also risen significantly, from 12 per thousand live births in 2008 to 20.3 in 2013.

The report concluded that without the occupation, the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory could produce twice the GDP it currently generates; chronic trade and budget deficits, as well as poverty and unemployment, could recede; and economic dependence on Israel could end, as confirmed by the report of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace, in which he referred to the harmful effects of the occupation authorities denying Palestinians access to their natural resources, especially in Area C of WB.<sup>16</sup>

UNCTAD's 2017 report reaffirmed the economic and social difficulties facing the Palestinian economy due to the Israeli policies, especially the high rates of unemployment, deterioration of humanitarian conditions, the 38% drop in donor support in 2014–2016, and by about 13% in 2017—according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), accelerated settlement expansion in violation of Resolution 2334, as evidenced by the 40% increase in 2016 (compared to 2015) in housing construction in these settlements, and the restrictions imposed on the movement of Palestinians. The report also reviews some of UNCTAD's technical assistance to the Palestinians during 2017.<sup>17</sup>

### **8. International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL)**

Palestine succeeded in joining INTERPOL, whose total number of members has reached 192 States. In the vote of the INTERPOL General Assembly in September 2017, 75 countries supported, 24 opposed, while 34 abstained from voting.<sup>18</sup> In November 2016, Israel succeeded in deferring the consideration of Palestine's membership, as Palestine received only 56 votes for, while 62 voted against and 37 abstained from voting. The Palestinian application was agreed to be reconsidered in 2017,<sup>19</sup> which has taken place and ended with Palestine being granted membership.

INTERPOL is concerned with the exchange of information on international criminals, particularly in international crimes involving counterfeiting, smuggling, and the illegal arms trade, as well as providing police consultations to some States.

Israel reacted strongly to this vote, and the reactions of Netanyahu and other ministers, as well as the Israeli media, indicate a deep sense of increasing “international understanding” of Palestinian rights, especially in the UN and its specialized agencies, in addition to other intergovernmental organizations.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Fourth: The United States (US)***

US policy toward the Palestine issue in 2016–2017 can be divided into two parts: the first is the results of President Barack Obama's term (Democratic Party), which ended in 2016, and the second is the transition to a Republican administration headed by President Donald Trump in 2017. The results of the eight-year presence of the Democrats in the White House (from the beginning of 2009 until the end of

2016) can be identified by looking at the last lengthy speech on the Middle East by John Kerry on 28/12/2016 at the Dean Acheson Auditorium in Washington DC. The speech included the following key points:<sup>21</sup>

1. Kerry emphasized the two-state solution, despite the fact that the reality is that it is no longer a straight forward solution to implement; it is rather moving toward one state dominated by Israel, and perpetual occupation.
2. He defended the decision not to use the American veto against the Security Council's resolution passed on 23/12/2016, criticizing the remarks of the Israeli permanent representative to the UN, whom he described as somebody "who does not support a two-state solution."
3. Kerry stressed his strong opposition to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, referring to the increased US funding to support Israel, even in the midst of the US financial crisis and budget deficits. He stated that US financial support to Israel amounted to more than half of the total US global FMF, including an MOU concluded with Israel in the fall of 2016. The \$38 billion MOU is to be provided over the next 10 years; a number, Kerry maintained, that "exceeds any military assistance package the United States has provided to any country." He added, "No American administration has done more for Israel's security than Barack Obama's." He quoted the words of the Israeli Prime Minister saying that US military and intelligence cooperation during Obama's term in office has been "unprecedented."
4. Kerry criticized the PA President, Mahmud 'Abbas for "failing to condemn specific terrorist attacks and naming public squares, streets and schools after terrorists."
5. He affirmed the US role in thwarting Palestinian efforts "to delegitimize Israel in international fora," the most recent of which the "wholly unbalanced and inflammatory UNESCO resolution regarding Jerusalem." He criticised the PA's attempts to criminalize Israel in the International Criminal Court (ICC). He also criticised Hamas' policy and armament, citing the harsh conditions of the Palestinian people in GS.
6. Kerry criticized the settlement policy and pointed out that the number of settlers rose during the Obama administration (starting 2009) to approximately 100 thousand. He then added a statement which bore a serious connotation saying, "We understand that in a final status agreement, certain settlements

would become part of Israel to account for the changes that have taken place over the last 49 years—we understand that—including the new democratic demographic realities that exist on the ground.”

7. He affirmed that East Jerusalem forms part of the territories occupied in 1967, and that is part of the US policy which is based on the 1978 opinion of the State Department Legal Advisor.
8. Work should be done to compensate refugees and provide “permanent homes” for them and that “the solution must be consistent with two states for two peoples and cannot affect the fundamental character of Israel.”
9. Jerusalem should not be divided and the holy sites should remain accessible to adherents of all three monotheistic faiths.

Kerry’s speech confirmed that the Obama administration had implicitly accepted the annexation of some settlements in the occupied territories of 1967 to Israel while believing there should be “permanent homes” for the Palestinian refugees—a statement that suggested the US had abandoned any pretense of adherence to the right of return.

The US rejected any boycott targeting Israel (although in January 2016 the US Customs and Border Protection issued a reminder of its 1995 statement that “goods produced in the West Bank or Gaza Strip shall be marked as originating from ‘West Bank,’.. ‘Gaza Strip.’” And “It is not acceptable to mark the aforementioned goods with the words ‘Israel,’ ‘Made in Israel.’”). The 2016 US provision of generous assistance to Israel, amounted to \$3.8 billion a year (over the following 10 years) including \$3.1 billion in FMF, while the Palestinians would receive \$400 million annually, including for the security and economic sectors. This meant that the aid provided to the Palestinians is amounts to 10.5% of that given to Israel. The new MOU on Security Assistance concluded by the Obama administration on 14/9/2016 pledged to increase military aid for the next 10 years from \$30 billion (previously agreed on) to \$38 billion. This makes the total US assistance to Israel since its inception \$127.4 billion; knowing that this amount is much larger if calculated based on our contemporary purchasing value.<sup>22</sup> As for the US aid to the Palestinians, no agreement was reached. Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah said that the PA had received no aid from Washington in 2016, while the US State Department said in a statement in December 2016 that it had provided Ramallah with over \$357 million in 2016, and an additional \$95 million

was given to UNRWA in WB and GS, totalling \$452 million. However, the USAID website indicates that the United States provided a total of \$317 million in 2016 and provided the same amount again in 2017.<sup>23</sup>

The term of the Republican President Trump began with his visit to KSA and Israel in May 2017, participating in the Arab-American Islamic Summit held in Riyadh. Trump reiterated his support for Israel and urged the parties to return to negotiations. His policies, according to his and his staff's statements, can be seen as follows:

1. The confrontation with Iran and the armed Islamic organizations is considered more important than dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>24</sup>
2. Financial, diplomatic, and military support for Israel should continue, with the tendency to include Palestinian armed groups on the lists of "terrorist" organizations.
3. There was a failure to take a clear position on the issue of transferring the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in the first months of his term, which is something he promised to do during the election campaign.

Monitoring Trump's statements after his assumption of office in early 2017 reveals extreme disarray in the structure of his administration (successive resignations, media campaigns against him, contradictory statements and decisions on his part, etc.).<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, some statements by the Trump administration highlight positions that require extreme caution. For example:<sup>26</sup>

1. A statement by a White House official ahead of a meeting between Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that the Trump administration "would not push the two-state solution."
2. In a press conference with Netanyahu in February 2017, "Trump directly broke with diplomatic tradition on the issue by saying his concern was the 'deal,' not whether that included a state for Palestinians." He said, "I'm looking at two states and one state," adding, "I like the one that both parties like. I can live with either one."

On 6/12/2017, Trump signed the proclamation recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and directed "the State Department to begin preparations to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem." He called "on all parties to maintain the status quo at Jerusalem's holy sites," adding that his announcement "marks the

beginning of a new approach to conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.” It is noted that the US Congress, on 23/10/1995, adopted the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which stipulates that “Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the State of Israel” and that it “should remain an undivided city, while deciding that the United States Embassy in Israel should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999.”<sup>27</sup> US presidents’ policy used to be signing a six-month waiver overriding a 1995 law requiring that the embassy be transferred to Jerusalem, and Trump’s comment on that was: “Some say they lacked courage.”<sup>28</sup> As for the factors helping in such a decision, they include the rise of the right wing in the US, the influence of the Israel lobby on US decision-making, in addition to the general state of weakness of Arab and Muslim countries.

Despite extensive international and Arab condemnation, the State Department’s Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, David Satterfield, affirmed that “the decision by the President was, is, will remain firm.” He explained that the US President “made clear that this step did not touch upon, did not deal with, did not resolve or prejudice any of the specific aspects or boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem”, and that Trump affirmed “that these measures in no way prejudice the outcome of final status negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians.” Satterfield assured that the “President is absolutely committed with his peace team to doing everything in his, in our power to move forward at a point in the new year, a peace process, a peace initiative, which can move the region forward,” however, he declined to give any details.<sup>29</sup> Some US media outlets had their own analyses concerning the Trump decision, where *The New York Times* newspaper saw that “Mr. Trump’s decision, a high-risk foray into the thicket of the Middle East, was driven not by diplomatic calculations but by a campaign promise.”<sup>30</sup>

This decision was condemned internationally and caused a fury all around the world. Governments asked the US to reverse the decision, which was also refused. 521 protests were held in various non-Arab countries, of which 91 were in the US, a few days following the decision, more than 300 protests took place in some European cities.<sup>31</sup> In India, rallies, protests and events were organized in more than 150 cities, condemning the US move.<sup>32</sup>

During an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, on 8/12/2017, many members rejected the US move. The UN ambassadors of Sweden, France, Italy and

the UK said that the decision “contradicted international law and Security Council resolutions.”<sup>33</sup> On 18/12/2017, the US vetoed a UN Security Council call for the declaration to be withdrawn. The text, tabled by Egypt, stressed that “Jerusalem is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations” and that “any decisions and actions which purport to have altered, the character, status or demographic composition of the Holy City of Jerusalem have no legal effect, are null and void and must be rescinded.” It also demanded that “all States comply with Security Council resolutions regarding the Holy City of Jerusalem, and not to recognize any actions or measures contrary to those resolutions.” The resolution was rejected by a vote of 14 in favour to 1 against (US veto).<sup>34</sup>

UN Secretary General António Guterres stated, “Jerusalem is a final status issue that must be resolved through direct negotiations between the two parties,” and reiterated his position that rejected “any unilateral measures that would jeopardize the prospect of peace for Israelis and Palestinians.”<sup>35</sup> The decision was also rejected by Turkey, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, Canada, Brazil, Italy and North Korea...,<sup>36</sup> in addition to Bolivia and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.<sup>37</sup> The President of the European Council Donald Tusk affirmed that the 28 “EU leaders reiterate firm commitment to the two-state solution and, in this context, the EU position on Jerusalem remains unchanged.” The statement by the EU’s heads of state and government adds fresh weight to the criticism of Trump’s move, which upended seven decades of US policy on the sensitive issue of Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup>

UK Prime Minister Theresa May has added her voice to the dissent over President Trump’s move, “We disagree with the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital before a final status agreement.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s spokesperson, Steffen Seibert announced “The German government does not support this position because the status of Jerusalem can only be negotiated within the framework of a two-state solution.”<sup>39</sup>

As for France, the French President Emmanuel Macron considered the decision “a regrettable” one, and said, “France and Europe are attached to a two-state solution.”<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis also rejected Trump’s decision, wishing that everyone remained “committed to respecting the status quo of the city, in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the United Nations.”<sup>41</sup> China and Russia expressed their concern, considering it counterproductive and destabilizing.<sup>42</sup>

On 21/12/2017, during a rare emergency meeting, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to call “upon all States to refrain from the establishment of diplomatic missions in the Holy City of Jerusalem.” By a recorded vote of 128 in favour to 9 against, with 35 abstentions, and where 21 states were absent, the Assembly adopted the resolution.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Fifth: The European Union (EU)***

Despite a number of European resolutions on the settlement of the Palestine issue, EU countries refrained from taking measures to make Israel comply with the resolutions of international bodies. Indeed, a study by the European Council on Foreign Relations in October 2016 refers to two important matters:<sup>44</sup>

1. EU countries, while recognising the two-state solution, do not work to change the mechanisms of achieving this solution and remain committed to the same mechanisms that have not produced any results. The report indicates that the most prominent of these mechanisms is the “incentives” policy, which aims to “moderate its behaviour and move along the path of peace with its Palestinian neighbours,” which has proven to be unsuccessful.
2. “Differentiation refers to a variety of measures taken by the EU and its member states to exclude settlement-linked entities and activities from bilateral relations with Israel.” The EU considers Israeli settlements in the 1967 occupied territories including those in East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights, illegal. However, this policy is not practised by many EU countries. Suffice to state here that the importance of this policy is that the EU Council’s report “EU Differentiation and Israeli Settlements,” in 2015,<sup>45</sup> led to a direct decline in the Tel Aviv banking index by 2.46 points.

The report argues that EU consensus around differentiation has broadened, adding that, if the EU wants the two-state solution to “remain a viable option, then the process of differentiation must be accelerated and streamlined.” Perhaps the UK and France are the least committed to pressurising Israel, especially with regard to dealing with the products of the Israeli settlements. However, the Brexit could boost the more assertive European attitudes in adopting the aforementioned “differentiation” policy. Some European countries support settlement building by

investing in Israeli banks, which in turn provide loans to settlers. “To date, 17 EU member states have advisories warning their businesses of the legal, financial and reputational consequences they could expose themselves to in dealings with Israeli settlement entities.”

Perhaps the resolution of the European Parliament on the achievement of the two-state solution, which was based on the Foreign Affairs Council’s conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process issued on 18/1/2016, was the most important during the period the study was conducted (2016–2017). The resolution states,

The only lasting solution to the conflict in the Middle East remains that of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace within secure and recognised borders, on the basis of the 1967 ‘green line’ and with Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

The resolution urged “all Member States to unconditionally recognise the State of Palestine,” and stated that the “entrenchment of a one-state reality of unequal rights, unending occupation and creeping annexation of the West Bank, as well as the vanishing prospect of Palestinian statehood, require a rethink of EU policy towards the conflict.” In addition, the EU condemned “all acts of violence against civilians.” It also condemned the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and called for a series of measures against this policy, as well as establishing “a robust EU monitoring and compliance mechanism in relation to trade originating from the settlements.” It underscored “the resolve of the international community, as expressed again by the UN Security Council in December 2016, not to recognise any changes to the 1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem.” It expressed “its grave concern over the exploitation of Palestinian natural resources by Israel and the prevalence of forcible transfer, notably in Area C, which constitutes a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions.” It also urged “the Israeli Government to immediately, unconditionally and completely lift the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip,” deplored the “continued Palestinian disunity,” and called “on all Palestinian forces to resume efforts towards reconciliation.”<sup>46</sup>

As for the aspects related to Palestinian human rights under occupation, the report of Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor on Israel’s policy towards EU-funded projects in Palestine, indicates that, in the first months of 2016, there was an increase in the number of demolitions in the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories. This was the result of an Israeli reaction to the EU’s resolution

in 2015 to label the products of the Israeli settlements established in the 1967 occupied territories in a step to boycott them on a large scale. A report issued by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) “has documented 120 demolitions against EU-financed buildings in the first three months of 2016.” The European report criticized the fact that “this information is actively suppressed by European officials to avoid embarrassment” with Israel.<sup>47</sup> Not to mention that some European countries buy shares in Israeli banks, and these Israeli banks finance settlement projects in the occupied West Bank. In addition, some European States, especially Eastern European countries, do not abide by the resolution to label products imported from Israeli settlements.<sup>48</sup>

As for the international conferences hosted by Europe in 2017 for the purpose of considering the Palestine issue and working to advance the peace process, the Paris Conference (Conférence de Paris Pour la Paix au Proche-Orient) was the most prominent. It was held in January 2017 with the participation of 70 countries, including permanent members of the UN Security Council and the EU, represented by EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini. Delegates restated their commitment to the two-state solution, and that neither side should take unilateral steps.<sup>49</sup>

In March 2016, the European Commission announced a \$274.1 million assistance package for the Palestinian people, \$184 million of which is set to be funnelled directly to the PA, and about \$89 million to UNRWA, with another amount to be announced later in the year.<sup>50</sup> About €20 million (Around \$18.2 million) in humanitarian funding was also provided by the European Commission in 2017.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Sixth: BRICS States***

The BRICS group (Russia, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa) account for 41% of the world’s population, with a GDP equivalent to 22% of the GWP. The five States also belong to the G20. This makes this group a political and economic force, capable of influencing international relations, including the Palestine issue, especially as Russia has insisted since 2013 that the group should give political and security issues more attention.

The Group have held nine summits, two of which were in 2016 and 2017, and the Group's statement issued in India in October 2016 provided for:<sup>52</sup>

1. Reiterating the necessity to implement the two-state solution on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions, the Madrid Principles, the Arab Peace Initiative, and all agreements between the two parties to the conflict.
2. Negotiations between the two parties to the conflict to take place with a view to establishing an independent, viable, and territorially contiguous Palestinian State, living side by side with Israel, within secure borders on the basis of the 1967 lines.
3. East Jerusalem shall be the capital of the State of Palestine as envisaged in the relevant UN resolutions.

As for the summit held in China in September 2017, Paragraph 42 of the summit's statement reads:<sup>53</sup>

We reiterate the urgent need for a just, lasting and comprehensive solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East on the basis of relevant United Nations resolutions, the Madrid Principles, the Arab Peace Initiative and previous agreements between the parties through negotiations with a view to creating an independent, viable, territorially contiguous Palestinian State...

The participants stressed their readiness to aid the achievement of this goal.

In general, the ceiling of these states' support for the Palestine issue has been declining in the past years, with their interests and economic considerations on the increase, and with the state of weakness and fragmentation witnessed in the Arab region. There is also a focus among some of the BRICS states on supporting the "two-state solution" and the establishment of a Palestinian state, as dictated by the peace process, while avoiding denouncing the Israeli occupation and condemning Israeli settlements and arbitrary practices.

As for the individual relationship between the BRICS and the Palestine issue, Russia are the most active:

### **1. Russia**

The Russian Foreign Ministry published the general indicators of Russian foreign policy, which had been approved by Vladimir Putin in November 2016, and in which (Item 92) the following was stated:<sup>54</sup>

- a. "Russia will continue making a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa."
- b. "Supporting collective efforts aimed at neutralizing the threats that emanate from international terrorist groups."
- c. Continued promotion of political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in the States of the region, respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination without external interference.
- d. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and member of the Middle East Quartet, Russia will further strive to achieve a comprehensive, fair and lasting resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in all its aspects consistent with international law.

In June 2016, a meeting was held between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Riyad al-Maliki, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian Authority, where the following points were emphasised:<sup>55</sup>

- a. Calling for the activation of the efforts of the Quartet.
- b. Emphasising intra-Palestinian unity.
- c. Affirming the importance of the Arab initiative (2002). Lavrov said that "Prime Minister Netanyahu repeatedly referred to the Arab Peace Initiative as a generally acceptable basis for future efforts," and that he did not hear "Benjamin Netanyahu say anything about the need to amend it."
- d. The Paris International Conference in June 2016 was referred to as a basis upon which to resume "negotiations within existing international legal solutions."

Moscow look keen on "restoring Palestine unity and overcoming the rift" within the Palestinian front, especially between the Hamas and Fatah movements. This was evident in Lavrov's remarks to representatives of the Palestinian organizations during their meeting in Moscow in January 2017.<sup>56</sup>

Moscow has shown willingness to provide assistance to the Palestinian people, as evidenced by the press conference which President Putin and Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas held in May 2017. Putin referred to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) that would include Palestine among the users of the common preference system, exempting Palestinian goods from customs duties when entering the EAEU territory. He added that there were 500 Palestinian

students studying at Russian universities; and that “Russia took part in work to renovate Bethlehem’s historic and religious centre – Star Street,” in a way that would bring increased numbers of pilgrims and tourists from Russia (More than 300 thousand Russian tourists visited Palestine in 2016). Putin stressed the necessity “to maintain bilateral relations, refrain from unilateral steps, search together for mutually acceptable solutions.” He emphasised the need to reach a negotiated political solution based on international law. As for ‘Abbas, he agreed to hold a trilateral meeting in Moscow on the basis of a two-state solution,<sup>57</sup> following an invitation by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev during his visit to the occupied Palestinian territories in November 2016. This invitation was an extension of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s September 2016 invitation to both Israel and the PA to hold negotiations in Moscow. However, that had not produced any results because the Israeli side refused to pledge to stop settlement expansion as requested by the PA.

## **2. China**

It is not possible to separate the Chinese policy on the Middle East from China’s strategic project (One Belt, One Road Initiative) which seeks to link China and Asia with Europe by means of establishing land and sea corridors through the Middle East; especially with the growing Chinese trade with the region, and the increase in China’s investments in the Arab region and with Israel, which reached approximately \$55 billion with the Arab world and about \$16.5 billion with Israel in 2016.<sup>58</sup>

Although China is the only major Power that is not part of the Quartet, it does have a special envoy to the Middle East, Gong Xiaosheng, who regularly meets with leaders of both parties to the conflict.

The statement by the Chinese Ambassador to UN, WU Haitao, delivered in December 2016 at the UN Security Council, sheds light upon Chinese trends regarding Palestine. The delegate, following the vote on the resolution on Israeli settlement in the 1967 Palestinian occupied territories, indicated:<sup>59</sup>

- a. China’s full support for the UN Security Council to play its role in the Palestine issue.
- b. The Council’s adoption of Resolution 2334 (which we referred to earlier) was an important decision reflecting “the common aspiration and wish of the

international community and heeds the just demand of Palestine and the Arab countries.”

- c. Called upon Israel to implement the Resolution in a practical manner by immediately ending both its settlement activities and the demolition of Palestinian homes, in order to create conditions for the relaunch of the peace talks.
- d. Called upon both the Palestinian and Israeli sides to honor their obligations, maintain calm, exercise restraint, and to “establish mutual trust so as to return to the right path of peace negotiations as soon as possible.”
- e. Affirmed the continuation of China’s support for Palestinians to establish their independent, fully sovereign state on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital.
- f. China’s willingness to work with the international community “in scaling up the diplomatic efforts to promote an early, comprehensive and just solution to the conflict between Palestine and Israel.”

The Chinese position on the vote on Resolution 2334 caused a “sharp reaction” in Israel, despite the attempts by the new Israeli ambassador in Beijing (appointed in early 2017) to emphasize the solidity of Chinese-Israeli relations.

Although China’s pro-Israel lobby is centred in Shanghai (due to the city’s role in hosting German Jews in the 1930s and during World War II), most Israeli thinkers are less confident in China because they see it as a future force that will change the rules of the international system, which is controlled by the West, and which currently forms the main base of Israel’s defence.<sup>60</sup>

Chinese President Xi Jinping had confirmed his country’s position on the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital at his meeting with the Arab League in early 2016; where he announced that the Israeli-Palestine issue “can’t be overlooked at any time and its resolution must be a top priority,” a position confirmed by Chinese Ambassador to Israel Zhan Yongxin.<sup>61</sup> He also announced aid of \$7.6 million for a solar power station project in the Palestinian territories.<sup>62</sup>

In the hope not to marginalize the Palestine issue, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a project during his meeting with the Palestinian president in Beijing in July 2017 (nearly four months after Netanyahu’s visit to Beijing). The Chinese

project is based on four elements, and this is the second time China put forward an initiative following their earlier initiative in 2013. The new Chinese initiative includes these elements:<sup>63</sup>

- a. Advancing the two-state solution based on the 1967 lines and East Jerusalem as the capital of a new Palestinian state.
- b. Emphasising the concept of common, comprehensive, co-operative and sustainable security, and the need to immediately end the construction of Israeli settlements; take immediate measures to prevent violence against civilians; and call for an early resumption of the peace process.
- c. Coordinating international efforts to introduce peace-promoting measures that include a joint contribution at an early date.
- d. Promoting peace through development and cooperation between the Palestinians and Israel; the peace through development notion had been proposed by the Chinese president in 2016 in a speech delivered at the Arab League in January 2016, and “China is expected to play a bigger role in the Middle East in the future, especially as the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative advances in the region.”<sup>64</sup>

During a meeting between the Palestinian and Chinese presidents in July 2017, China had proposed a “trilateral dialogue mechanism”: Palestinian-Israeli-Chinese.<sup>65</sup>

### **3. India**

In previous reports, we referred to the strategic shift in India’s policy after Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), known for their great sympathy with Israel, took office as Prime Minister of India in May 2014.

Modi’s tenure has witnessed diplomatic activity between Israel and India, with Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj visiting Israel in January 2016. Modi also made the first visit of an Indian prime minister to Israel in July 2017. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin had preceded him with a visit to India in January 2017, followed by Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Israel. These visits have strengthened the relationship between the two sides, as bilateral trade grew from \$200 million in 1992 (the start of diplomatic relations between them) to \$4.5 billion in 2016, primarily based on sales of military hardware, agriculture and water technology, bearing in mind that the Palestinian president visited India in

May 2017, during which time the Indian prime minister confirmed his support for the concept of establishing a Palestinian state.<sup>66</sup> Israel, with their growing relations with India, rank third after the United States and Russia in arms sales to India.

The issue of counter-terrorism is a convergence point between the Israeli and Indian sides, especially with the circumstances surrounding the Indian situation with Pakistan in Kashmir, and the desire of the two parties to limit the phenomenon of “political Islam.”<sup>67</sup>

Concerning the Palestinian side, the Indian position supporting the concept of a Palestinian state remains, as was evident from the Palestinian President’s talks with the Indian Prime Minister in May of 2017.<sup>68</sup>

#### **4. South Africa**

The general tendency in South Africa indicates refusal to deal with Israel because of its close relations with the racist apartheid system that ruled South Africa. However, the South African government are gradually moving toward deepening relations with Israel, while continuing to sympathize with Palestinian demands.

Studying at the trade between the two sides reveals that “the two countries have gone from a parity situation in 2009 to one where Israel exports to South Africa almost four times as much as it imports,” according to statements by the South African Ambassador to Israel, Sisa Ngombane.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, considering the policies of the South African parties reveals a number of important differences in their position towards the Palestine issue, as follows:<sup>70</sup>

- a. African National Congress (ANC):** Supports the Palestinian people in “their struggle for self-determination” and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines. They believe that appropriate arrangements must be made for the safe passage of all Palestinians between GS and the WB, however, they do not call for boycotts and divestment or sanctions against Israel, despite encouraging its members, whether they are in the organization or aligned movements, to “desist from any trips to Israel.”
- b. Democratic Alliance (DA):** Supports the two-state solution with Jerusalem as the capital of the two states; does not support the boycott of Israel.

- c. **African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP):** Supports what the Palestinian and Israeli sides agree on, does not see Israel as a “settlement regime,” and does not support the boycott of Israel because they believe that “Israel’s innovative technological advances and expertise in many sectors would be of significant benefit to South Africa.”
- d. **United Democratic Movement (UDM):** Supports the two-state solution through peaceful negotiations and believes that as long as the solution to the Middle East conflict is viewed as a monopoly of the US, a real and lasting solution will remain far-fetched. The movement calls on South Africa to invite the Palestinian and Israeli sides to hold talks in South Africa and does not support the boycott of Israel.
- e. **Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF):** They support the UN resolutions on Palestine, and the boycott of Israel so that it would be brought to a negotiation table and agree to the national resolutions on the matter of the people of Palestine.
- f. **Congress of the People (COPE):** Calls for a two-state solution and supports the boycott of Israel.

## 5. Brazil

When the UN General Assembly approved the partition of Palestine in 1947, the President of the General Assembly was the Brazilian delegate to the United Nations, Osvaldo Aranha, who was one of the most prominent supporters of the establishment of Israel.<sup>71</sup> Eventually, Brazil recognized Israel in 1949, one year after its establishment.

Israeli-Brazilian relations became strained in 2016 after Brazil refused to approve Israeli Ambassador Danny Dayan as Ambassador of Israel to Brazil because he was considered a “settler leader” in the West Bank. Later they approved Ambassador Yossi Shelly as an accredited ambassador of Israel, after leftist President Dilma Rousseff, whose party (Democratic Labor Party) is seen by Israel as having an anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian stance, was impeached. Michel Temer, of Lebanese origin, took over as President after Rousseff. The Israeli Foreign Ministry asserted that “There is no doubt that this appointment will promote friendship between

the two countries and further relations across many spheres, including economy and trade.” This speculation is backed up by the fact that Temer appointed Jose Serra, a Jew known for his tendency toward Israel, as Brazil’s Minister of Foreign Affairs; he also appointed another Israeli-born, Ilan Goldfajn, as President of the Central Bank of Brazil (Banco Central do Brasi).<sup>72</sup> However, the current Brazilian President Temer is facing corruption charges, which could open the door to his replacement, with his term due to expire in 2019.<sup>73</sup>

It is noted that the rate of Jewish emigration from Brazil to Israel was on the increase during the years 2016–2017 (the number of Jews in Brazil is approximately 120 thousand), for different reasons, mostly economic.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Seventh: Japan***

Japan’s policy on the Palestine issue revolves around three points:<sup>75</sup>

1. Financial and economic contribution to support Palestinian projects within the framework of a broad Japanese vision that includes both Jordan and Israel in what is known as the “Corridor for Peace and Prosperity” initiative in the Jordan Rift Valley, launched in 2006. In 2017, 39 tenants signed an agreement to operate in the industrial park there and six factories are in operation. With respect to Japan’s aid, Japanese assistance to the Palestinians reached \$1.77 billion between 1993 and 2017, an annual average of \$74 million.
2. Japanese policy, according to its official statements, opposes the Israeli settlement policy in WB and East Jerusalem. The Japanese Foreign Ministry confirmed that position in five statements in 2016 and two other statements in June and July 2017, calling upon Israel to freeze settlement activities because they are in “violation of international law,” and because it constitutes a request by the international community.
3. The constant call for peace and avoidance of violence, which was reiterated in the Japanese Foreign Ministry statements in July 2017 following the Jerusalem incidents and the clashes between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli security forces around the *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

## ***Eighth: International Public Opinion***

International public opinion can be divided into three segments: There are two non-governmental groups: people on the one hand and civil society, on the other, represented by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The third segment is governmental, represented by intergovernmental organizations (here, excluding the United Nations).

### **1. Public Opinion**

Most of the polls conducted in 2016 and 2017 indicate that a negative view about Israel is widespread, whether in countries known to be hostile to Israel or in countries that are friendly to it (such as the US, UK, or others). This is confirmed by most relevant academic references.<sup>76</sup>

A careful review of the previous polls' results indicates that:

- The negative view of Israel was double the positive view.
- Of the 19 countries (representing most of the world's population), Israel remains "the fourth most-negatively viewed country out of the 17 countries in the ranking. Of the 19 countries participating in the survey in 2017, 15 lean negatively in their opinion of Israel's influence, while four lean positively."
- When looking at the period from 2014 to 2017, perceptions of Israel remain largely negative in Europe.
- US opinion still ranks first globally in its positive view of Israel.
- European public opinion is still closer to the negative view, with the positive view being the weakest in Germany (7%), while France is the highest (28%).
- African countries rank second after the US in the positive view of Israel (Kenya and Nigeria).
- There is a noticeable increase in the positive view of Israel in China (34% in 2017 compared to 13% in 2014).
- The negative view remains the highest among Latin American countries.

The following table shows that there has been a change, albeit slight, in the negative attitude toward Israel in American public opinion:

**Table 1/8: American Public Opinion of Israel 2016–2017<sup>77</sup>**

Year	Very favorable	Mostly favorable	Mostly unfavorable	Very unfavorable	No opinion
<b>2017</b>	29	42	21	6	2
<b>2016</b>	30	41	16	8	5

The following table shows the result of Country Ratings Poll among 18 thousand people in 19 countries between December 2016 and April 2017:

**Table 2/8: Views of Israel's Influence by Country 2017<sup>78</sup>**

Country	Mainly positive (%)	Mainly negative (%)
<b>US</b>	59	28
<b>Canada</b>	35	52
<b>Peru</b>	20	50
<b>Mexico</b>	16	63
<b>Brazil</b>	16	61
<b>France</b>	28	62
<b>UK</b>	25	66
<b>Greece</b>	19	35
<b>Spain</b>	11	60
<b>Germany</b>	7	36
<b>Russia</b>	34	20
<b>Turkey</b>	10	77
<b>Kenya</b>	46	26
<b>Nigeria</b>	45	37
<b>China</b>	34	57
<b>Australia</b>	31	56
<b>India</b>	21	40
<b>Pakistan</b>	10	49
<b>Indonesia</b>	9	64
<b>Global average</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>50</b>

## 2. NGOs Concerned with the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Some references indicate that there are 114 NGOs concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict, covering various aspects of human rights (political, economic, and social), in addition to international NGOs.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps what was mentioned by Daniel Egel, one of the researchers of the RAND Corporation's report "The Costs of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," on the impact of the Palestinian BDS movement reveals the Israeli concern. Egel stated that if BDS took hold in a serious way in 2014, "in 2024 the economy would be \$8.8 b [billion] smaller than if it remained on its current path."<sup>80</sup>

Among the influential NGOs is Amnesty International, which devotes an annual special report on the situation in WB and GS. In its 2016–2017 report, the organization indicated:<sup>81</sup>

**First: Israel:** The organization recorded the following Israeli practices:

- Unlawful killing of Palestinian civilians, including children, in WB, GS and Israel.
- Continued detention of thousands of Palestinians who oppose the occupation, including hundreds of administrative detainees.
- Continued arrest of hundreds of Palestinian children, many of whom were subjected to abuse, and some were held under renewable administrative detention.
- Exercising torture and ill-treatment of detainees, including children, with impunity.
- Continued development of illegal settlements and land confiscation and the imposition of severe restrictions on the movement of Palestinians.
- Continued siege of GS.
- Unprecedentedly high number of demolitions of Palestinian homes in both WB and the Negev desert, forcibly evicting residents.
- Deportation of thousands of African asylum-seekers.

**Second: PA:** The report recorded the following criticism:

- Restrictions on freedom of expression.
- Arbitrary arrest of political opponents.
- Prevention of peaceful assembly and protests and forcible dispersion of them.
- Torture and ill-treatment of detainees.
- The death penalty remaining in force for murder and other crimes.

The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is conducting a preliminary examination into the situation in Palestine to determine whether the situation there meets the criteria to pursue a formal investigation into crimes committed in Palestine, by both sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians. In October, an ICC delegation visited Israel and WB and held meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials.<sup>82</sup>

## *Conclusion*

A review of the political literature on the Middle East indicates that the term “Palestinian-Israeli” conflict is increasingly used at the expense of the term “Arab-Israeli” conflict. This signifies a shift in the geography of the conflict, making its borders bilateral rather than regional, which puts the Palestinian side in a less influential position. This is a situation that the Arab regimes are primarily responsible for, whether because of their failed policies, preoccupation with their repression of their peoples, or agendas which are linked to external forces.

The most important features of growing international sympathy with the Palestinian side, clearly visible in international public opinion or the involvement of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, are:

1. It is mostly theoretical and not supported by effective international measures, especially regarding Israeli settlements in WB, the Judaization of Jerusalem, and the continued GS siege.
2. The major Powers (US, Russia, EU, China, and Japan) are working to alter the peace process to serve their goals in the region, as evidenced by the following:
  - a. The US wants to expand NATO and encircle Russian and Chinese areas of influence in the region. It is pushing Arab countries toward Israel to achieve this strategy.
  - b. Russia hopes to break into American spheres of influence by attracting Arab countries toward its strategy, prioritising this above the Arab-Israeli conflict.
  - c. China supports the peace process to facilitate the success of its project in integrating the region into the “One Belt, One Road Initiative,” since continuation of the conflict further increases obstacles to this project.

- d. Japan supports the peace process through its “Corridor for Peace and Prosperity” initiative, aiming to strengthen Arab trade with the Japanese market, so as to buy Japanese goods which are capable of competing with European and American goods, while the continuation of the conflict depletes Arab budgets as they head to arms markets, where Japan is not competitive.
- e. The EU are still pursuing projects such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) proposed by France and supported by Germany to make these projects a success. This is not possible without reaching a settlement to the Arab–Israeli conflict.

### **Future Implications**

The current international scene suggests the following:

1. Other regional issues (other than the Arab-Israeli conflict) will remain a priority in the short term, especially the repercussions of the Arab political turmoil since 2011.
2. International pressure will increase on the Palestinian resistance bloc through financial or diplomatic pressure to make them abide by what the PLO agreed with Israel.
3. Israeli settlement building will continue, but the international position will not change to effectively confront it, for it will remain limited to diplomatic and legal criticism. International public opinion and NGOs may be more visible and effective in confronting it, with EU civil society groups being perhaps the most visible in this regard.
4. With regard to the Palestinian reconciliation agreed between Hamas and Fatah in October 2017, it was welcomed by the US in terms of the potential for easing humanitarian conditions in GS and the PA’s return to Gaza,<sup>83</sup> while it is assumed that the EU would participate in border control through the European Union Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah Crossing Point (EUBAM Rafah).<sup>84</sup> However, the prospect of the reconciliation’s ultimate success depends on the extent to which each of the parties is willing to give up their strategic choice (negotiations or armed resistance).

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The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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# The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



Edited By

**Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh**



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## The Most Prominent Projections for 2018–2019

In a strategic environment that still suffers instability and lacks fluidity, and with the complex overlap of regional and international interests, it is not easy to predict specific trends with a high degree of certainty. However, it appears that the issue of Palestine will maintain many of its previous crises and repercussions to the next stage. The most important possible trends can be summarized as follows:

- The peace process seems to have reached a dead end and is on its way to collapse, as the Oslo Accords have proved incapable of bringing real political solutions. If the conditions of the game remain the same, the “two-state solution,” from the Palestinian perspective, will practically collapse; there is no hope for the PA to become a full-fledged Palestinian state on the land occupied in 1967. There is also no real prospect that the status of the PA will change from being an instrument used for the purposes of occupation, more than serving the Palestinian people and their aspirations.
- Palestinian reconciliation is not expected to be achieved if it continues to be handled in the same way, and if the official Palestinian leadership does not seek to achieve a genuine, effective partnership that reflects the true weight of the Palestinian forces at home and abroad, based on a national program that enshrines the fundamental rights and needs of the population. Emphasis should be placed on pathways not controlled by the Israeli side, such as the restructuring of the PLO. There is also a better future opportunity to put the Palestinian house in order considering the peace process failure.
- The number of Palestinians exceeded the number of Jews in historic Palestine in 2018. This impressive statistic reveals the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and their endurance on their land and are undoubtedly a concern for the leaders of the Zionist project 120 years after its inception, and 70 years after the establishment of Israel, for they have failed to give a “Jewish” character to the land of Palestine. However, it is necessary to be aware of any steps that the Israelis might take to try to displace large numbers of Palestinians. Therefore, the Palestinian leadership, the Arab and Muslim countries and all supporters of Palestinian rights, bear a great responsibility in supporting the steadfastness of the Palestinian people on their land, and thwarting the Israeli plans.

- The suffering of the Palestinian economy in WB and GS will continue as long as they are under Israeli occupation and siege, and under the obligations of the Oslo Accords and the Paris Protocol. Israeli domination of the PA's exports and imports (more than 60% of trade volume) will continue, while Israel's GDP will remain more than 20 times bigger than its Palestinian counterpart. The Palestinian budget will remain largely dependent on foreign aid and tax revenues that the Israeli occupation collects, rendering the PA budget hostage to Israel.
- It is not expected that the GS siege will be lifted if the Palestinian resistance maintains its assets and infrastructure.

Some aspects of the blockade may be lifted as the government in Ramallah takes control of GS, keeping in mind that it is not the decision-maker on this issue. Israel will ease the blockade in line with the PA's ability to control the situation and implement the Oslo Accords entitlements in GS as it does in WB. These entitlements are basically linked to the role of the PA and to its security obligations towards Israel. According to Israeli standards, such entitlements will only not be completed unless security and weapons of resistance are controlled (above and under ground). The resistance forces should not expect any gains from those who adhere to the Oslo Accords, who will continue to press, even gradually, to implement the required entitlements.

Egypt is expected to continue its pressure on Hamas to "empower" the Ramallah government in GS in order to implement its program, albeit in a "soft" and gradual manner.

- Israeli attacks, Judaization and settlement projects, especially in Jerusalem and the rest of WB, will continue; Israel will try to achieve the greatest gains and build facts on the ground, in a weak and disjointed Arab and Islamic environment. However, the Palestinian resistance, in its different forms, and which to a varying degrees continued in the Jerusalem and Lion's Gate uprising will not stop. Moreover, resistance in WB is expected to continue and escalate, as frustration with the peace process increases, and as the prospects for a two-state solution diminish. Palestinian resistance also has the chance to strengthen its qualitative capabilities in the coming year.
- The Israeli population is moving increasingly to right-wing politics and religious extremism, abandoning the peace process and the "two-state solution." Despite economic growth and high GDP and GDP per capita (about \$40 thousand

annually), mirroring Western European countries; and despite the enormous Israeli military strength and advantage; despite the state of official Arab and Islamic weakness; Israel will continue to face existential crises. This is due to the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and their resistance on their land, a popular Arab environment that refuses to deal with Israel, and an unstable strategic environment surrounding Israel, amid the growing presence of resistance forces hostile to Israel.

- Arab countries, which have official relations with Israel, specifically Egypt and Jordan, are expected to maintain these relations. Israel may attempt to make some breakthroughs in its relations with some Gulf states on the basis of the alliance against Iran and the fight against “terrorism”; however, this penetration will not be easy; Arab parties may prefer to work “under the table” with Israel because of widespread popular opposition to normalization with Israel.
- As for the Muslim countries, the OIC is not expected to improve its virtually insignificant performance towards Palestine. With the increasing threats to Jerusalem and *Al-Aqsa* Mosque, there is a chance of an increase in popular-Islamic interaction with the Palestine issue.

Concerning the two countries studied in the PSR, Turkey, under Erdoğan, will continue its active political support for Palestine, while maintaining its lukewarm political and active commercial ties with the Israeli side. Nevertheless, it will pursue its active trade with Israel, which exceeded \$4 billion in 2017.

Iran will also pursue its political and military support for the Palestinian resistance and its open hostility against Israel, but will avoid direct friction, and will focus on the implementation of its regional agenda.

- The international environment will continue to show sympathy and support by a large majority (about 140 countries) to the question of Palestine in the UN General Assembly and a number of international institutions. However, the US and the major powers that control the UN Security Council and dominate international politics, will not allow any resolutions or measures that could force the Israeli side to take steps it would reject.

There is a chance of a slow increase in global hostility to, or negative views of, Israel, and there is an opportunity to strengthen the successes of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movements, which are causing growing concern among Israelis.

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